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Renegotiating Trans* Existence through the Surrealist Art of Claude Cahun

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Declaration: This submission is my own work. Any quotation from, or description of, the work of others is acknowledged herein by reference to the sources, whether published or unpublished.

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(Un)acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather and transcestor, Claude Cahun and to all -the known and lesser known- transgender people who ~~have been~~ are being erased and silenced.

Abstract

This dissertation is interested in a decolonial, post-feminist reading of Claude Cahun's surrealist autobiography *Aveux non Avenus* (1930) and two of his *Self-Portraits*, produced in 1927 and 1928 accordingly. Due to its preoccupation with the themes of queerness, identity formation and performance, Cahun's oeuvre has been the center of attention of several scholars, even a century after its publication. Research has thus solidified the queer artist's presence and unfolded his immense contribution to Surrealism, despite the movement's openly homophobic agenda. However, by classifying Cahun under "Women in Surrealism" and forcefully discussing his "lesbian" identity, a second violence has been done, upon an artist (and a persona) that has clearly stated; "Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me" (Cahun 232). In addition, Cahun's multiple allusions to gender dysphoria throughout his writings and photographs as well as the gender ambiguous/genderless language he deploys in his autobiography are simultaneously evidence of trans existence and trans absence from the historical and literary archive. This analysis thus consciously resists the (re)imposition of Western epistemology upon these literary forms that are creating a language and a counter-epistemology of their own, and the evocation of theoretical frameworks is only to test them next to Cahun's Surrealist and Dadaist techniques; Since Surrealists were influenced by the theorizations of Freud and Lacan it is worth examining how the trans artist reappropriates the (transphobic) episteme of psychoanalysis; The transgender subject is restaging (before the mirror) his attempt for identification, a process that was destined to fail during the Lacanian Mirror Stage: Unable to possess his identity, he returns to this stage, only to testify to the fact that identity- or being in Jean-Paul Sartre's terms- will never be accessed; Being will never be produced in (or by) consciousness; In a similar fashion, the so-called "gender identity" will never be acquired through a (conscious) repetition of gender(ed) acts. Cahun thus who realizes that *performance* (and not the Butlerian performativity) is all there is, transforms it into a strategy aimed towards the decolonization of his existence: *Narcissistic performance* questions, through parody the fixity of God and the sustainability of gender, which resembles religious absolutism. *Prosthetic performance*

questions the naturalness of “biological” organs and replaces them with prosthetic ones (masks or make-up) which become the only existing truth about his performance/iteration of identity: *Sous ce masque un autre masque. Je n’en finirai pas de soulever tous ses visages.* I thus argue that *Aveux Non Avenus* (including the surrealist photomontages) and Cahun’s *Self-Portraits* have proposed ways to exist otherwise (ways that the third wave feminism is unable to conceive and protract) and which require a decisive turn from gendered language and the epistemology of gender. This movement will allow for a radical rethinking of trans* presence in Surrealism, modernism and the literary archive at large (starting with Claude Cahun). At the same time, it will enable a reconfiguration (and gradual elimination) of the confining categories of sex, gender and gender expression, pointing towards a discourse that ratifies *performance* as the only (extant) element of the body.

Introduction

The Manifesto of Trans* Existance

The manifesto of trans* existance is an invitation (rather than a negation) directed towards the reader to embark on a philosophical and literary adventure¹ which requires of them to be ready (if enough qualitative evidence is provided) to:

- Reject any predetermined notions like the objectivity of historical narratives (as opposed to “fiction”) or the scientific accuracy of critical analyses, even those published in widely acclaimed academic journals; zines and other types of anti-institutional works of art, like the ones contained in countercultural digital or physical archives, can carry testimonies of one’s existence in a way that “officially” published historical, medical or literary records where (politically) reluctant to do. Taking that into account, the philosophical ideas which will be deployed are not to verify the validity of Claude Cahun’s work, but to supplement what is already offered by the artist’s work and facilitate an exploration of the decolonial potential of his (linguistic and non-linguistic) performances.
- Accept that lack of presence of a social group within the literary canon and their sequential misrepresentation or misconstruction, does not equate to the excluded’s inexistence (at this or that point in time) or their essential unwillingness to (re)present themselves politically and/or through art. It is also worth mentioning that progress in terms of human rights has never been linear, but subject to political and legislative changes.
- Only use the correct name and pronouns (he/him) for the artist, despite the knowledge of his deadname and given pronouns. I myself will be erasing the wrong pronouns and replacing them with the correct ones, in an attempt to avoid reproducing the colonial violence which would otherwise resonate between the lines until a “sic” (in parenthesis) would annunciate the trans* subject’s salvation. (Reading through the misgenderings is almost unbearable).

The conceptualization of this project, centering around the work of the Surrealist artist Claude Cahun- which is essentially a decolonizing project- comes along with a

moment of linguistic awkwardness; How can we speak of absence and presence (in history) at the same time? The new phrase should be able to convey a certain “pastness” in reference to “transgender” history; The word “transgender” here is already limited to a discontinuous “present” and specifically, one that accepts “gender” as an arche- it carries the coloniality of gender within it and accepts it as part of *being*. We need thus a term that should convey a certain “pastness”: We may agree with Michel-Rolph Trouillot who points out that “the past does not exist independently from the present” and that “pastness” in fact, a “position” (15). For this reason, we may argue that the necessity of doing justice to Claude Cahun is in fact the realization that “that past should be constantly evoked as the starting point of an ongoing traumatism and as a necessary explanation to current inequalities” that marginal populations, like trans* subjects are currently facing (Trouillot 17). The asterisk next to the epithet “trans” is important and necessary; It symbolizes –like it does for Jack Halberstam- transition, a certain passing of borders and the acceptance that borders are still there. At the same time, it fills with absence the substitution of “gender”- it mobilizes the “gap” that gender leaves behind (*Who Sings the Nation State* 75). This is also an epistemological gap; At first, the experience of this gap, which arises as soon as one tries “to problematize the matter of [trans*] bodies” manifests as “an initial loss of epistemological certainty” (*Bodies that Matter* 6). Admittedly, however this risk becomes a lot more manageable when someone writes from an already disadvantaged position; From the *positionality* of a trans, queer, lower-class author you are more likely to be left with the impression that epistemology has failed you. This is the positionality but also, the *anguish* of *trans* existence*: It holds on to the traces of the Derridean difference and deferral, while it resonates with *extance*; The emergence of a counter-cultural epistemology, through a form of existence that stands out, that is protruding. In fact, it is the mobilizing force of what is still existing, which is not destroyed or lost within the hetero-coloniality of western discourse. Trans* existence is thus the legacy, of all trans* subjects, since B.C. (that is before Cahun, not Christ), to consciously resist the coloniality of (gendered) being.

Notes

¹ I am borrowing here Pierre Mac Orlan's term from the preface of *Aveux Non Avenus*, being attentive to his suggestion of approaching the book as an adventure; Not however, one that is merely "interior," as Orlan argues, nor does it oppose the idea of plasticity, before a purely naturalized human condition (6).

Floating tissue

(scars)

Where are all the trans

Bodies?

You

refuse

To

show

Me

Among

the ordinary

One

I

Am

one

To

wonder

How

anthropomorphic

Posthumanity

looks

like;

What

are you?

Tell

me

creature

visitant

of

My mind re;
 disturbed
 Stre-----tching and lifting
 The skin
 Uncertainly
 grin
 smile my friend
 despite
 the
 bitterness
 for
 I left the sun now
 overwhelms
 You give
 In to
 Salted
 Solace.

Αμοργός, Αύγουστος 2021

...The mythopoesis of trans history starts with absence*

Chapter 1

Reclaiming an Un-trans-cendable History

1.1 Introduction to the Un-trans-cendability of History

I am frightened of misinterpretations. If I omit the slightest inflexion I distort the verb and the whole of life. It's much better to show only the tiniest corner of it.

Them - that's quickly said!

Me - I would have too much to say.

—ANA 196 (emphasis added)

Almost a century after the publication of *ANA*, Claude Cahun's philosophical inquiry directs the reader towards the "inflection of the verb" which is in fact intrinsically linked (if not synonymous) with the paradox of human exceptionalism; Those who are authorized to "distort the verb" namely, the rules of language are in fact in control of life, what qualifies as a legitimate form of existence. Cahun's words refuse thus, the comfort of language, which even in anthropocentric terms, still accommodates a certain hierarchy, iterated in the form of absence (from language and history) or misrepresentation (within language and history). The plural pronoun "them" creates here two points of departure: a first reading of "them" refers to those who criticize Cahun's writing as too "quickly said", abstract and fragmented, which in ableist, logocentric discourses is equivalent to "lack of scientificity". A second reading belongs to "them" the marginal subject, the outcast of logos and gendered language, whose difference is "too much", uncontainable by western epistemology. This positionality, necessarily justifies a certain fear of misrepresentations" and is very likely to wonder: "It is so much more simple to act than to speak. Have I ever heard the opposite?" (*ANA* 170). The rhetorical question implies that the opposite is closer to the truth: Cahun's words not only allude to a prioritization of language over non-linguistic fictions (an idea often raised in discussions around colonization, class and racism) but expose yet another logocentric facet of western discourse, which is responsible for perpetuating and consolidating empirical deduction: The attribution of

certain linguistic signs to specific “actions” which are in fact not actions but other signs, which in turn are single-faceted and don't do justice to the multimodality of expression. An example of this stream of thought reversed would be as follows: Cahun is wearing high-heels=> wearing high-heels is a feminine “action” => wearing high heels is a sign of femininity because women wear high heels=> Cahun is a woman because he wears heels!¹ Cahun himself is critical of the myth of the “sign” as an “archy” (in Derridean terms) when he writes “Illusion and truth are twin children who have swapped their pink and blue ribbons so often that by naming them [as masculine or feminine] according to their colour I would get them teased, even if I happened to be right.” (ANA 152) Gender is thus exposed here as the false signifier of gender expression, which also became the false signifier of the different traits and acts attributed to the feminine and masculine codes. And since we have never “heard the opposite”- again “hear” involves ableism and logocentrism- there is no proof in the archive of what Cahun describes-his trans*confessions- nor has Cahun ever been heard in reference to trans* existence in the literary archive except for 4 (very different) types of sources: H. Lewis’ “The Politics of Surrealism”(1988), Micha’s *TimTum A Trans Jew Zine* (1999), Juno Richard’s article “Claude Cahun’s Pronouns” and a newsprint poster available in MOTHA’s website, are the only media that acknowledge and renegotiate Cahun’s transness. Other than those (who barely qualify as sufficient “evidence”) we are standing before a century-old archive of the Surrealist artist’s misrepresentations and perhaps an even longer history of trans erasure before him. And since only one of these sources is an academic publication, at the same time that Cahun admits that he does not have “a scientific mind,” “who will define infinity for [him]?” (ANA 42)

The problem with Cahun’s mis(re)presentation dates back to Pierre Mac Orlan and Francois Leperlier, the two men who wrote the preface and the postface of the original edition of *Aveux Non Avenus*. “On ne pouvait espérer mieux” (236) writes Leperlier, Cahun’s biographer, when commenting upon the process of publication, after a series of deadnaming and misgendering Cahun and their partner, Susan Moore. Some may argue that there was no “trans vocabulary” available nor gender neutral language to describe the author of “Portrait de l’Androgyne”² who clearly states in his latest novel “*Shuffle the cards. Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that

always suits me.” (ANA 173) Interestingly, the first uses of gender-neutral pronouns (they/them) as a substitute for the binary-gendered singular were “recorded in the fourteenth century and remain common even now in regional variations like y’all (you all) and y’uns or yinz (you ones), which are sometimes used in reference to an individual.” (Stryker 28) Some may also claim that there is no such option available in the French language. And while there is some merit in this argument (although this is not the main reason why Cahun is misrepresented) Cahun himself seems to have partly resolved this problem in his writings by choosing the pronoun of his preference (il) and masculine adjectives while for the most part of the text, he is refraining from gendered language at large. Something interesting happens however when the poet writes:

He, my body, is pure (almost pure). *He* would be devoted to you, and *his* heavy weight could restrain the crazy prisoner. ‘The flesh is faithful...’ - You understood all this so well, so why? Why don’t you want to? (ANA 86 emphasis added)

The body here is attributed the masculine pronoun “he” while Cahun refrains from using the first-person pronoun “I.” The body thus does not become a metonymy for the whole “I” and in fact, it is the bodily dysphoria that restrains “the crazy prisoner”, not his thoughts. If anything, tracing Cahun’s confessions, imagination provides a temporary sense of freedom for him: “I hold my breath. I lie down, curled up, abandoning the confines of my body, I fold myself in on an imaginary centre...” (ANA 43). In fact, the poet, admits that the space of imagination has become more euphoric than any lived-experience: “Happiest moments of your life? A - Dreaming. Imagining myself to be different to how I am. Playing my *preferred role*” (ANA 71 emphasis added).

What is also noticeable here is that this “preferred” form of expression (not “gender”) -which has previously been attributed the masculine pronouns- is not a state of being, but a role. The adjective “preferred” however implies at the same time that there are other roles that he is willing to perform, less frequently and are less likely to evoke euphoric feelings. This becomes more obvious in the fourth chapter of the novel, where the poet engages in an imaginary discussion with a figure named Aurige,³ which foreshadowed in a way, Cahun’s androgyny (and transness), before the “Portrait de l’Androgyne” in *Heroines*:

C - Aurige offered herself - and I refused her. I am the most virtuous among men!

B - The poet courted her, but Aurige preferred me. I am the happiest among men! (ANA 85)

The extreme level of ambiguity does not allow for a clear distinction between the poet and Aurige, an internal monologue or a dialogue with a different person (who is potentially attracted to Cahun), complicating even further the discussion around Cahun's gender expression and sexuality. The verbs "offered" and "refused" allude to the poet's past performance-the one that required the use of feminine pronouns and was rooted in determinism- which was not sustainable since his "past self" preferred a different role in order to be "the happiest among men!" (ANA 85). This also explains yet another instance of a transmasculine performance: "...Instinctively I looked for the buttons of my 'fly' on the right (men's side), but the tailor (you have to tell them everything!) had sewn them on the left for me." (ANA 145) The word "tailor" can be read here as a metaphor for his contemporaries who have tried to make Cahun "fit" into specific gender categories (as if that category was not a construct to begin with) while also foreshadowing his misconstruction as a "lesbian" in the decades to come. Some scholars paradoxically accept that Cahun's "gender expression" was completely different from the stereotypical "lesbian looks"⁴ of the time, and yet they proceed with his misidentification.

In contrast thus to established readings and despite the perpetual violence that Leperlier reproduces, he does not mention "homosexuality" or a "lesbian sexuality" (as Jennifer Shaw erroneously claims in the first chapter of her book) among "les thématiques électives" that he points out; he uses the term "transvestissement"⁵ which in fact genuinely describes (despite the term's negative connotations today) Cahun's multiple and alternating performances (gender expressions), while alluding to the blurred boundaries of gender and sexuality in the early decades of the 20th century. According to the transgender historian Suzan Stryker, "the distinctions between what we now call "transgender" and "gay" or "lesbian" were not always as meaningful back then as they have since become. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, homosexual desire and gender variance were often closely associated" (51). However, despite the yet not as clearly distinguished categories of

“gender” and “sexuality” there is further evidence in *ANA* that showcases that he was not only attracted to women either: “Little killer of loves, I had many lovers just a short time ago (all men were my lovers); (*ANA* 104) The author here “confesses” that he was attracted to men (all men for that matter!) which in fact proves all critiques that portray him as “a gay woman” groundless. Furthermore, Cahun is deliberately being critical of these confining distinctions which bring along certain social expectations in regards to identity performances: “They make such a distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ – imbeciles! May there soon be a ‘feminism’ for cinedes” (*ANA* 144).

A hundred and fifty years after the creation of Women’s Suffrage Society, France’s first women’s suffrage group⁶ and yet forty years before Stonewall, Cahun emphasizes the necessity of an intersectional feminist movement, that will not revolve around single-issue struggles, but one that fights for the rights of all “cinedes.”⁷ Second wave feminism which gathered momentum in the mid-20th century will however be unwilling- for the most part- to interrogate the long-consolidated categories of activity and passivity. White, cis women feminists have overlooked the racialized origins of gender roles-how the European settlers would construct Africans as passive in order to control their labor, during the colonization of the Americas. On the other hand, black (lesbian) women scholars, while bringing race into the discussion of emancipation have also hesitated to make the decisive step away from biological determinism, even decades after Cahun had stated: “Bodies and souls, how skeletons resemble each other! It’s the fat, the excess, that are the individual distinctions we’re so proud of” (*ANA* 226). A third wave feminism, influenced by decolonial thought, would agree with Cahun’s rejection of the gender binary and will precipitately defend an awkward distinction between “sex” and “gender,”⁸ in order to “prove” the existence of gender-non-conforming experiences while trying to oppose Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist views. This has been proven particularly challenging for supporters of transgender rights, since feminist separatist discourse is still, to this day, operating in two postulations: the first one protracts that issues regarding “women’s” sovereignty over their bodies are essentially bound to a specific anatomy (for example abortion rights) legitimizing the a priori exclusion of transgender subjects. When, however, the intersectional claims of modern feminism were expressed through the distinction between sex and gender, feminist philosophers, like

Judith Butler, found themselves before a dead end: “the category of women does not [and should not] become useless through deconstruction” for the discussion around feminist issues to be facilitated, although this very category has expanded in order to fit more bodies (*Bodies that Matter* 5). The second postulation, is perhaps associated with this expansion and, insists that trans needs (like trans specific healthcare) and struggle for rights had, after Stonewall, become-and supposedly still are-intrinsically different than those of non-trans, queer individuals.⁹ Taking thus into account how transphobic discourse operates, in the following sections I will explore how the discussion around gender dysphoria and trans affirming healthcare is in fact negotiating the coloniality of (gendered) being by exposing the systemic violence of the institutions of western medicine (including psychology), Christian religion and constitutionality, towards gendered bodies. An anarchoeology of trans existence will attempt to revive the shared origins of homophobia and transphobia, dismantling thus the trans exclusionary claims (and the unnecessary limitations of the second-wave feminism) while announcing the possibility of not a post-gender, but a de-gendered mode of existence.

1.2 Gender Dysphoria and the Institution of Western Medicine

My thought brings the recalcitrant body to face its reflection and makes it stay there; affects surprise and pretends not to recognize it at first, criticizes it and judges it - judges the body unworthy of it - finally sending it to sleep like a guard so that it can escape this sordid prison. Sometimes it gets caught in the trap if it has to clink glasses and drink something narcotic together. (*ANA* 94)

It is indeed a very difficult task to look for (and at) literary instances of “recalcitrant” bodies throughout history and not reduce these experiences to “symptoms” of gender variance and Gender Dysphoria.¹⁰ I would like to focus on two particular challenges that emerge from this anarchoeology: Firstly, Gender Dysphoria is a western epistemological concept that is the diagnosis and the symptom of what it describes: the sense of unhappiness that arises from the incongruence between a person’s sex and gender, that “is not healthful and that is susceptible to therapeutic treatment;¹¹ similarly, it

suggests that the feeling of unhappiness about gender could be transient rather than a defining characteristic of a kind of self.” (Stryker 24 quoting from DSM-V) Gender Dysphoria was not however always perceived and defined in these terms; In fact, the term replaced Gender Identity Disorder in 2013 (in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) in contrast to the classification of the trans identity among “other disorders” in the two previous versions of the manual. Before DSM-III transness was not even listed among the disorders. Taking that into account and for the purpose of looking at a pre-DSM trans experience, as is the case with Claude Cahun-which also happens to undermine gender as a category- I suggest when discussing “Gender Dysphoria” thinking of the word “gender” as in “sex-assigned at birth and the gendered experience that it presupposes or brings about” as well as the “primary (ex. vaginas, penises, ovaries, testicles) and/or secondary sexual characteristics (breasts, body hair, voice pitch etc.).

Secondly, it is already problematic to prove that the subject of discussion is in fact trans*, because the description of their experience aligns with the criteria of the particular diagnostic manual which have been subject to change, not only for Gender Dysphoria but for other “disorders” as well. In fact, as far trans identities are concerned, as Sandy Stone explains in her Post-Transsexual Manifesto, “initially, the only textbook on the subject of transsexualism was Harry Benjamin's definitive work “The Transsexual Phenomenon”¹² (9) according to which tests and diagnosis were formed and which depended on “anything as simple and subjective as feeling that one was in the wrong body” (8). As a result, trans* subjects who wished to have access to trans healthcare “had read Benjamin's book, which was passed from hand to hand within the transsexual community, and they were only too happy to provide the behavior that led to acceptance for surgery” (Stone 9) meaning, that they reproduced the born-in-the-wrong-body narrative. Contemporary scholars and activists need thus to be extra cautious when they read works like *Aveux Non Avenus*, where Cahun judges his “unworthy” body and confesses his need to “escape this sordid prison” (ANA 94); this can easily lead to a generalization (and an essentialist reduction) of trans* experiences and further legitimizing these diagnoses.

Cahun’s narration, however, luckily-but not accidentally-goes beyond the stereotypical, white-western perception of transness and “gender dysphoria”:

This is not without an ulterior motive... I shave my head, wrench out my teeth, my breasts - anything that is embarrassing or annoying to look at - stomach, ovaries, the brain, conscious and covered in cysts. When I have but one card left in my hand, just one heartbeat to notice, but to perfection, of course I will win the trick. (ANA 43)

Cahun's feelings of "gender dysphoria" create a defamiliarizing effect for the reader who searches for sexed body parts that are incongruous with his trans* experience; indeed breasts and ovaries, "anything that is embarrassing or annoying to look at" for many trans people are mentioned here, yet among other body parts (like teeth), organs (stomach and the brain) and even the hair in his head, which the author shaves-a gender expression that he maintains in the majority of his Self-Portraits. Cahun's experience with dysphoria is thus associated with gendered and genderless body parts, and gender expressions (like long hair), in other words, false performances that he is forced to sustain. This testimony thus proves how an entire epistemology created around gender non-conformity is in fact failing to contain the variety and the totality of trans* existences and exposes the diagnostic Manuals as problematic before they were even created.

What is more, the way gender dysphoria is (still) portrayed in the DSM, as a symptom but also a (white, western, medical) diagnosis, necessarily interrelates transness with an "ideology of cure":

Cure requires damage, locating the harm entirely within individual human body-minds, operating as if each person were their own ecosystem. Second, it grounds itself in an original state of being, relying on a belief that what existed before is superior to what exists currently. And finally, it seeks to return what is damaged to that former state of being. (Clare 15)

As is thus the case with diagnoses of transness, DSM-V offers gender dysphoria as something to be cured namely, "the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's assigned gender" (DSM). Ironically enough, the manual also notes that "many individuals who experience gender incongruence are not distressed by it, but that considerable distress . . . can occur if the desired physical interventions by means of hormones and/or surgery are not available" (Stryker 24). In a paradoxical way, the institution of western science acknowledges that it

is responsible for the perpetual violence that it creates upon trans individuals by gatekeeping our access to medical treatment and increasing our risk of self-harm and suicide. Cahun also testifies to this experience when he says: “If I regain consciousness after so much fainting, I will suffer unspeakable discomforts in my flesh which is devoted to so many more delicate torments” (*ANA* 198). This could, in fact, have been the experience of a trans individual in the 21st century, proving the timelessness of gender dysphoria, while the allusion to “delicate torments” can be transposed to modern “treatments” of gender dysphoria which can include extremely problematic practices within clinics and which have already excluded trans individuals from revolting against them, because we depend on them. In other words, we have been finding ourselves unprotected, before a kind of violence which is not “state violence” but is legitimized by the nation-state. This realization is what motivates Cahun to write:

Tooth-pullers (amateurs and professionals).

Surgeons are torturers with good intentions. The difference shifts, depending on the case, on the people, from scorn to respect, from hatred to love. See it anyway you like. (*ANA* 187)

The artist is exposing here the entire institution of medicine for its exclusionary practices; from surgeons to dentists who he reduces to their “tooth-pulling” skills and, thus, criticizing their lack of “humanity.” What is more, the phrase “after so much fainting” (*ANA* 198) can be interpreted as the result of the lack of access to trans healthcare which was however available at the time that Cahun was writing *Aveux Non Avenus!* The sexologist and sexual-reformer, Magnus Hirschfeld had already founded the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, which provided counseling and treatment for “sexual transitions,”¹³ while 1930 (the same year that *ANA* was published) marked the beginning of modern “sex-reassignment” surgeries; Sir Harold Gillies, the pioneer of phalloplasty and uroplastic surgery, reconstructed penises in soldiers with blast injuries, implementing techniques from facial reconstruction surgeries that he developed after World War I.¹⁴ It was then accepted, even by medical professionals that a trans* person could not “fight” gender dysphoria on their own, which explains why Cahun had struggled with his body, having been excluded from trans healthcare facilities: “Œ - In vain do I try to put my body back where it was (my body with its dependencies), to see

myself in the third person. The ‘I’ in me is like the E taken into the O.” (ANA 226) Through this linguistic metaphor of trans existence,¹⁵ Cahun compares the unification of the letters O and E into the French diphthong Œ, with the coexistence of bodily performances that match with this identity with those that make him feel uncomfortable. This is, indeed, a forced unification, as the phrase “in vain” suggests and followed by the derogative “Get out of the O...” (ANA 226). The coexistence of the two letters, O and E, signifying the feminine bodily traits with the desire for masculine performances, is here an involuntary one.

The artist/ actor has felt dysphoric, trapped by his “body and its dependencies” that even the alternation between masculine and feminine performances (as I will explain in Chapter 2) has failed to an extent to do justice to the totality of his existence, which proves the necessity for trans surgeries before gender dysphoria was treated as a clinical symptom (before DSM 3). In fact, Cahun might have been aware of the possibility of medical transition, taking into account an even more direct reference to surgery: “stopped, but little as she¹⁶ is the beast has a harder life. Leftover instinct. This body should be pruned, branch by branch, member by member, call the surgeons” (ANA 138). Such a specific allusion to sex-affirmation surgery is impossible to go unnoticed, especially within the context of post-WWI Europe where they were firstly developed. Some may argue however that Cahun does not mention a “transsexual”¹⁷ surgery, so we have no reason to claim it as such. A possible explanation that overthrows this argument (along with the extensive trans* evidence analyzed so far) is that the term was not popularized up “until Dr. Harry Benjamin starting using it in the 1950s, in the aftermath of the spectacular publicity given to the 1952 surgical “sex change” of Christine Jorgensen” (Stryker 42) in the US, three decades after *Aveux Non Avenus* was published. What is more, if we assume that Cahun was familiar with the term- and he was in fact familiar with other trans related terms¹⁸-there is still the geopolitical setting of the time to be taken into account when analyzing his choice. By avoiding direct references to “transsexualism” or “sex-change surgeries” his work would have a higher chance of avoiding censorship at the time, as was the case with the magazine *Inversions*.¹⁹

And despite the fact that a lot more trans literature and trans representation²⁰ is available, the persisting exclusionary practices of the medical system and the social

vulnerability of trans* bodies, finding ourselves constantly unprotected Before the Law, activate what Jose Munoz would call the strategy of “disidentification”,²¹ a “mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it” (115):

We must deliver ourselves bound hand and foot. There’s no better way. Have we got the time, or the means, to check? We are forced to by the action and interminable interrogation of actors. (*ANA* 148)

As Cahun points out, trans* subjects have always been forced to go along with the colonial medical narratives in order to survive the “interrogation” of the medical professionals and have access to trans healthcare. Trans existence should, however, at the same time, “work against dominant ideology” in order to deconstruct these colonizing practices (Munoz 115). The word “deliver” here- almost like a trans* version of Irigaray’s childbirth metaphor- mobilizes the trans* subjects’ agency over our bodies and our capacity to “give birth” to ourselves. In these moments- rather than a single moment- of self-definition, which circumvent the role of the “mother” (and thus biological determinism) and the role of the gynecologist (who delivers genders instead of babies) the transgressive bodies should defend the multiplicity of their existence, by producing counter-literatures that undermine the validity of dominant narratives.

Aveux Non Avenus, as a counter-literature provides a treacherous ground for a trans experience-one that is deliberately critical of the medical practices- also refuses to comport with the stereotypical perceptions of transness (and “reason”) of its time, and of the years to come: “I woke up. And touching each of my deformed, hideous and hateful limbs, I declared myself safe and well.” (*ANA* 95) In this section of the book, Cahun describes yet another instance of “gender dysphoria” while emphasizing his self-diagnosis as “safe” and “well” which is in great contrast with the feeling of unsafety which are associated with transphobic medical practices. This description also opposes the transphobic discourses that would be developed in the last decades of the 20th century, as is the case with Leslie Lothstein’s reports in Walters and Ross’ *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*:

[transsexuals as a class] were depressed, isolated, withdrawn, schizoid individuals with profound dependency conflicts. Furthermore, they were

immature, narcissistic, egocentric and potentially explosive, while their attempts to obtain [professional assistance] were demanding, manipulative, controlling, coercive, and paranoid. (Stone 3)

In opposition to all these, Cahun does not pretend to fit into what white, western epistemology accepts as a state of “sanity”- being “well” in fact does not mean “sane”- but embraces through several of his self-portraits, elements of madness and the grotesque. These performances (or embodiments) of madness should however not be mistaken for the artist’s lack of agency over his body or his incapacity to identify his feelings: “Standing at the edge of the great smooth soul - calmed crowd - he chose a flat body, the type that makes the furthest leaps when skimmed” (*ANA* 178). The verb “chose” here, written in past tense gives the impression that the author’s transition has already happened, ironically blurring the lines between reality and fiction, “science” and “subjective narratives.” What is more, choice implies action, which is in fact a voluntary one (as the author’s choice of active voice implies) suggesting that he is not just the recipient of the surgeon's therapeutic treatments.

In another part of *ANA*, Cahun also declares: “I want to change skin: tear the old one from me” (*ANA* 223). Again, the artist here suggests that it is his decision to “change skin” and he is the one to instruct the surgeon to alter it. (The use of present tense, however, in this case, juxtaposed with the previous example, blurs the lines between past and present, questioning thus the linearity of identity production, an idea that I will explore in detail in Chapter 2.) A similar effect is created in one of Cahun’s most famous Self-Portraits, in which he is sitting on a chair, holding what appears to be a fake barbell (Figure 1). The juxtaposition between the supposedly masculine elements such as the short hair, the flat chest (with the attached nipples in a masculine position) and the barbell on the one hand, and the feminine make-up, the scarf and the crossed legs, create a satirical and awkward performance of androgyny, which extends to a critique of masculinity and femininity, as several scholars have also observed. The artist’s irony here could be also oriented towards the medical institution which feels like a barbell that “weighs” the trans* subject “down,” yet not to the extent that he is unable to stand. In another Self-Portrait titled “I am training” (1927) Cahun is wearing the same sarcastic outfit and lifts the barbell with ease, using just one hand! This can be interpreted as an

“exercise” of resilience for trans* individuals who are designing themselves (and their body parts) as they wish, by claiming their access to gender-affirming healthcare. Also, the phrase “I am in training don’t kiss me,” written on Cahun’s chest, in between his artificial nipples, highlights the marginal subject’s agency over his body, which is performatively altered through training, in other words through the experimentation with different levels of masculine and feminine expressions. Furthermore, the ironic expression of the actor, along with this phrase, derogatively refuse the romanticization of his experience by any authoritative gaze and especially the medical institution that promises to “kiss” patients back to life, by offering live-saving surgeries as if they are a privilege and not a fundamental human right. But who gets to decide what is fundamental?



Figure 1. Claude Cahun, Self Portrait c. 1927 (courtesy Jersey Heritage Trust).

1.3 Crossdressing Laws and the Institution of Western Religion

For want of anything better: Does the world have to be badly made for a being who is odd, but sexually sociable, to be forced to take refuge in crime as if it were a convent, not only to live in it but even to create some new values there! But what kind of crime?... what does it matter! A dead end (*ANA* 165).

According to ILGA's 2022 "State Sponsored Homophobia" (SSH) report,²² as of December 2022, 65 countries as well as four sub-national jurisdictions have laws criminalizing queer identities. But someone is not born in the state of "criminality." In *Aveux Non Avenus*, Cahun presents crime as a state that one goes to inhabit, while he is aware that someone else has "made," predefined the definition of "crime." An interesting element is offered here-expressed as a dead end- and which alludes to one of Judith Butler's observations upon Arendt's "Decline of the Nation State" concerning the "right to rights- a very interesting formulation since the first cannot be grounded in any established government or social institution" (*Who Sings the Nation State* 47). It is necessary thus, in a trans*historical discussion of LGBTQI+ struggles to interrogate those sites of power who are authorized to deny "rights" and shape the definition of what qualifies as "crime." But because this authorization is not ahistorical nor does it happen objectively-as a human construct- we need to trace the different moral codes that would be politically transmuted to the state of "criminality":

The confession of my shame:

Will I blame the circumstances, my contemporaries? These aren't the circumstances of my life, these are its causes that have led it astray. I was condemned before I was born. Executed in absentia. (*ANA* 166)

In a similar way with which Butler problematizes the "precariousness" of different bodies in relation to their public dimension, Cahun discusses how trans*existence is not merely a personal experience of the body. In other words, the body-the trans body in this case- can never be completely private, but always subjected to the public realm, namely the legislative system of each polity but also, the public voices that conceive of its existence, its representations and its misrepresentations, aiming to govern the public

sphere. It is thus Cahun's positionality as a trans* subject that constructs his inferiority and produces the vulnerability of his social body. And it is exactly through this lens that the absence of trans terminology in literature from the North American-Western European archive as well as the impossibility of the creation and survival of trans literature throughout history should be (re)negotiated, especially if we take into account the crossdressing laws and the anti-gay religious and political agendas that were being implemented, during the last 3 centuries. Claude Cahun who was a member of "the far-left grouping of politicised intellectuals, 'Contre-Attaque'" and who, in 1939 joined the FIARI (Fédération Internationale de l'Artistes Révolutionnaires Indépendants), of which André Breton and Leon Trotsky were founding members, was well aware of the systemic "juridical complexes" that "govern how and where we may move, associate, work and speak." (Butler in WStNS 4). It is thus not accidental that *ANA*, despite its autobiographical nature, is interwoven with (and around) Cahun's political critique in regards to these colonial institutions that legitimized the inferiority of queer and trans* subjectivities, starting with the church:

Who wishes for caresses receives blows. Turn the sentence round and say with me: 'It's even more shameful! It's the ultimate insult!' (*ANA* 57)

By literally following the author's instructions, one can spot the reference to an illicit sexuality, which is portrayed as "shameful," or rather, as the "ultimate insult." A few lines later, Cahun traces the origins of these moral codes in the 19th chapter of the Old Testament, by referring to "Sodom, city of light" (*ANA* 58). According to the Bible, Sodom and Gomorrah were the cities in which human impurity reached its peak and were known for its popularization of homosexual practices, triggering thus god's anger and retribution in the form of "fire from the sky."²³ The gender-non-conforming artist doesn't however simply quote the homophobic/transphobic passage, but he parodies and deconstructs it; "We say 'Fire from the Sky' to simplify things, like telling children they were born in a cabbage. In reality, Sodom blazed up by itself at the amorous contact of its inhabitants with the Angels of the Lord God" (*ANA* 58). In Cahun's reappropriated version of the biblical narrative, sin was produced by the homosexual practices between humans and god's angels (who were sent by God as soon as Sodom's reputation became known). At the same time, the author emphasizes the human nature of homophobia and

transphobia, masked behind god's homophobic discourse, uttered in the form of religious laws in order to legitimize heterosexual superiority; Some of them are specifically criminalizing "male" homosexuality as is the case with a passage from Leviticus which states: «Καὶ μετὰ ἄρσενος οὐ κοιμηθήσῃ κοίτην γυναικείαν, βδέλυγμα γάρ ἐστὶ» (18.22) which emphatically repeats itself in lines 20.13; «Καὶ ὃς ἂν κοιμηθῇ μετὰ ἄρσενος κοίτην γυναικὸς, βδέλυγμα ἐποίησαν ἀμφότεροι.» Another passage from A' Timotheus, places sex-workers and queer men next to the slave owners and murderers: «δικαίῳ νόμος οὐ κεῖται, ἀνόμοις δὲ καὶ ἀνυποτάκτοις, ἀσεβέσι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοῖς, ἀνοσίοις καὶ βεβήλοις, πατρολώαις καὶ μητρολώαις, ἀνδροφόνοις, πόρνοις, ἄρσενοκοίταις, ἀνδραποδισταῖς, ψεύσταις, ἐπιόρκοις, καὶ εἴ τι ἕτερον τῇ ὑγιαίνουσῃ διδασκαλίᾳ ἀντίκειται» (1.9-10) while Deuteronomy, in lines 22.5, mentions that "A woman shall not wear man's clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God" (Stryker 42). It is thus from this historical perspective that "the difficulties of researching lesbian [and queer or trans] identities" ought to be evaluated (Gen 95). At the same time, in such mythopoetic moments of religious narratives we can trace the legitimation of "religious liberty" or "religious freedom" legal strategies in the 21st century.²⁴

It is thus not accidental that, as far as post-WWI France is concerned-where all laws about sodomy were repealed in 1791 during the French Revolution- religious laws still function as a means of oppression for a gender-queer subject and leads him to criticize them: "You condemned certain looks (which you alone knew how to see), I don't know which connections, and my idolatry (that's divine vengeance), and my verbal extravagance (shameful, literary)" alluding thus to church's condemnation of queerness (ANA 98). After this realization, he is forced to question not only God's existence but also the Judeo-Christian religion's restrictions towards individual freedom: "At first he had doubted God, and the concept of human liberty; then the material world and his own existence. . . . And the child began to merge with their disorder and lose his sense of self" (ANA 29).

The word disorder evokes again the politics of "cure" propagated by both the medical and religious institution, a kind of discourse that legitimized different levels of homo/transphobia, ranging from exclusionary policies, to hate speech and even to

conversion therapies, which are still widely popular. These are the very institutions that are thus responsible for the internalized homophobia and transphobia that the queer subject experiences and which prevent them from understanding themselves and expressing their gender/sexual variance. This in fact, explains Cahun's hatred towards himself and his confusion "with all the changes of pronouns that our personal declension of silence and our conjugation of the verb 'to love' imply" (ANA 105). The rare use of "female" pronouns in the novel might be linked to this confusion and internalized transphobia, that prevents him from abandoning completely the false performances (of femininity) for the sake of more authentic iterations of identity. This idea has been further problematized by the author himself who in an internal monologue asks:

Would I want it if the law allowed you to bequeath things to yourself, dying so that you would belong to yourself? Is it all by chance?... No. I only believe in what I want. I can believe in the impossible, for example: That God, You and I are one and the same place, that hell, paradise and my sheets merge together, that the instant, the eternal, my syllables long and short are (for those who would know how to pronounce it) one and the same word. (ANA 21)

Reading through Cahun's poetic lines, one can observe the connection between the law of God to the law that determines the limitations of one's freedom to their body which is not "by chance." The artist is further interrogating this relationship, tracing its origins back to the colonial period: "No guarantee of God. It's the white soul slave trade, God trafficking his glory..." (ANA 183) Cahun refers here to the legitimation of European coloniality on the pretext of religion, an idea that is aligned with Sylvia Wynter's historicization of Columbus' conquest in 1492; what she identifies as the "third purpose" of his conquest "was to help accelerate the spread of Christianity all over the world, in time for the Second Coming of Christ" (16).

Balance is our law.

In creating matter, God decreed a certain part of the soul as a dowry for himself. But too many bodies nowadays fight over the legacy. (ANA 192)

The word "matter" here (ὕλη in Ancient Greek) alludes to the first chapter of the Bible to the creation of all types of "matter" on (and around) earth by God (Genesis 1:1-

2:3) but also implies how, God creates the significance of something; “why and how it matters” (Butler 7). This second interpretation explains how religious discourse determined which bodies don’t matter, which bodies could be rendered into “interchangeable laboring bodies” for the economy of the colonies to be sustained. The need thus to consolidate a visible, class-based distinction, explains the long history of “public regulation of dress dating back to the colonial period, with rules that forbid people from disguising themselves in public or wearing clothes associated with a particular social rank or profession they did not hold, and which criminalized white people for disguising themselves as Indians (as was common during populist protests like the Boston Tea Party) or black people from impersonating whites” (Stryker 46). In order however for white heteropatriarchy to retain its power over all “other genders” (including white women) starting in the 1850s, a number of US cities began passing municipal ordinances that made it illegal for people to appear in public “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex” (Stryker 46). Around the same time period, a similar cross-dressing law passed under Napoleon in the 1800, according to which, women required a special permit to ‘dress as a man.’²⁵ It is however worth noting that the regulation of gender expression has not followed a linear path within this EuroAmerican colonial trajectory, nor has it affected all marginal bodies in the same way and/or degree; The first anti-crossdressing laws were passed in the 1690s in the colony of Massachusetts and were further popularized in the 19th century when more and more states were deploying “Municipal Laws Prohibiting Wearing Dress of Opposite Sex.”²⁶ An unforeseen break in this anti-crossdressing history would be marked however from 1775 –1783, during the American Revolutionary War, when several women and transmasculine individuals served in combat disguised as men, while others operated as spies.²⁷ This proves that crossdressing was not always considered a deviance and in fact, after World War 1, according to Stryker, people assigned female at birth who “could successfully present themselves as men had greater opportunities to travel and find work” (51). This distorted right-wing recognition of trans-masculinity perhaps explains the partial acceptance of *Aveux Non Avenus*, despite the overtly homophobic views of Surrealist artists (like Andre Breton) and despite the fact that “wearing trousers was still officially against the law for women in France” at the time that Cahun was producing his art (Doy 96). The lack however, of

legitimized gender equality and the persisting anti-queer politics, has led the trans* artist to seek refuge in his masquerades and even, “call for a never-ending state of carnival” in his short essay “Carnaval en Chambre,” published in 1926 (Doy 41).

Taking thus into account the historical passage from Judeo-Christian religion to the constitutionalization of gender inferiority, as well as the impossibility of complete assimilation within dominant ideology, trans* existence does not view prohibition as a way of regulating the exercise of public violence, but as a way of regulating the trans(gressive) body’s right to freedom. Excludable and excluded from (accessing) the Law, the queer subject realizes that rejecting and subverting the colonial narratives is only a partial claim towards liberation. This is why Cahun confesses to his revolutionary readers that from the positionality of trans* existence-always unintelligible and always protruding- “there is no point in making [himself] comfortable” while the “concrete and the real” are perpetuating his marginality. The only way for him to deconstruct the colonial violence is through an “attack [of his] favourite values first, these are the most resilient (ANA 137): “And the new order? Nature, abhorring a vacuum, provides for it fittingly, automatically and according to laws which it’s good to know about. Hit a head, a head appears. I’ll say it again, it’s about aiming high.” (ANA 137).

Notes

¹ Heels however, have not always been a feminine form of expression (they were firstly worn by men in royal circles so that they appeared taller than women and servants) nor do all women like wearing heels=> it is not enough evidence to prove one's femininity, masculinity or transness.

² In the first pages of his poetic collection *Heroines*, Cahun delineates a portrait of himself- a transmasculine subject or an "androgynous."

³ According to Leperlier, "l'aurige" was the charioteer during roman antiquity, while "L'Aurige de Delphes" is a famous bronze statue of a young man with androgynous traits.

⁴ In the homonymous chapter of her book, Gen Doy explains how "lesbians at this time recognized one another by wearing a shirt, a ribbon tie, a jacket with something in the pocket, and straight short hair slicked back" while admitting that "the closest Cahun's hair came to this is, interestingly, when he was acting the part of a male character in a play in 1929. She also mentions that "ties or cravats were fairly usual" whereas "Cahun tended to wear scarves" (98). What is even more unsettling about her analysis is that not only does she perpetually misgender Cahun (interpreting his chosen name as a "pseudonym") but, in the 3rd chapter of her book, she even goes as far as including a "registration card" issued in 1922, showcasing the artist's deadname and his "sex-assigned-at-birth." (89)

⁵ Transvestite is another old word coined by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (Stryker 40).

⁶ Accessed through <https://www.archives.gov/women/suffrage>.

⁷ Cinedes means effeminate gays (not lesbians or gay men) which could be referring to all forms of queerness, including trans peoples' homosexuality.

⁸ According to Stryker, "many people believe that gender identity—the subjective sense of being a man or a woman or both or neither—is rooted in biology, although what the biological "cause" of gender identity might be has never been proven" (15).

⁹ It is to these reasons that I attribute the need of certain scholars to "claim" writers and artists as gay or lesbian, offering thus cis queer representations to a predominantly

cis-heteronormative literary canon. This however can by no means legitimize the false representation of trans individuals as is the case with Claude Cahun.

¹⁰ Gender dysphoria was a common term among medical and psychotherapeutic professionals who worked with transgender populations in the 1960s through the 1980s, but it was gradually supplanted by the now-discredited diagnostic category Gender Identity Disorder, which was first adopted by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 in the third edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) and retained in the fourth edition of 1994 (DSM-IV).

¹¹ DSM-V acknowledges thus that a transgender person is inherently disordered.

¹² Written in 1966, Benjamin's work postdated an entire canon of trans literatures, many of which I have listed in chronological order in the last page of this dissertation.

¹³ Hirschfeld's term for homosexuals, transvestites and hermaphrodites.

¹⁴ The advancement of his techniques led to the first female-to-male surgery in 1946; the British physician Laurence Michael Dillon who felt "not truly a woman" consulted Gillies and underwent a series of thirteen operations spanning four years resulting in the transformation of his external genitalia.

¹⁵ Trans* existence in this passage functions like Sartre's "For-itself", which "seeks to find the Self it can never in any final sense possess. The mystic strives to surpass his being in an absolute Nothingness which is somehow fulfilling; the For-itself spends its life in a futile pursuit of Being and tries in vain to escape the nothingness which it is" (*BN* 27).

¹⁶ There are some rare instances in *ANA* where Cahun is actually using "female" pronouns but always in reference to what comprising his monstrosity and/or triggers his "gender dysphoria."

¹⁷ This word was used (and sometimes is still used) to "refer to those trans identities, practices, and desires that require interacting with medical institutions or with legal bureaucracies, in contrast to those trans practices that don't" (Stryker 40).

¹⁸ Uranism, was used to refer to women people "assigned female at birth" who were dressing in a masculine way. Cahun definitely knew this term, taking into account his text 'Les Jeux Uraniens.'

¹⁹ “Inversions was the first French gay journal. It was published between 1924 and 1926 and stopped publication after the French government charged the publishers with compromising public morality. Its full title was Inversions ... in art, literature, philosophy and science. Sexual inversion was a term used by sexologists in the late 19th and early 20th century, to refer to homosexuality.” (Wikipedia) Possibly due to this use of the term, Cahun, who had also contributed to the first publication of the journal, did not approve of its title, which was, according to Tamagne, to be changed to Urania from issue no. 3 onwards. (*Histoire de l’Homosexualité en Europe*, pp. 238–240)

²⁰ I am deliberately avoiding here the term representation which is doubly problematic: It implies that this experience has been (correctly if this is even possible) presented in the past, and that it is conceptually grounded, with all the political implications that this entails. In fact, “representation and inclusion have all sorts of institutional connotations” for Susan Briante, “in relation to failed attempts to counter white supremacy” (*Synthesis* 120). Secondly, it confines gender-non-conformity to one “true” and unified transgender experience. (This is exactly what the work of Cahun has managed to destabilize).

²¹ Muñoz, José. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11–12.

²² International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association: Lucas Ramon Mendos, *State-Sponsored Homophobia 2019* (Geneva; ILGA, March 2019).

²³ Καὶ Κύριος ἔβρεξεν ἐπὶ Σόδομα καὶ Γόμορρα θεῖον καὶ πῦρ παρὰ Κυρίου ἐξ οὐρανοῦ (Γένεση 19:24).

²⁴ According to ILGA, “this strategy entails conservatives and religious fundamentalists using legal systems to justify people denying provision of various forms of services or goods when they feel they don’t approve either of the “product” or the recipient. So, doctors can try to withhold abortion or other reproductive health care services, pharmacists can try to withhold providing contraception, bakers can try to deny customers cakes for same sex weddings and landlords can deny leases for housing to LGBTI people—all with legal protection” (30-31).

²⁵ K. Bill, 'Attitudes to Women's Trousers: Britain in the 1930s', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1993, pp. 45–53.

²⁶ Among the several anti-cross-dressing laws that passed in the middle of the nineteenth century, "the following San Francisco ordinance was enacted in 1863: If any person shall appear in a public place in a state of nudity, or in a dress not belonging to his or her sex, or in an indecent or lewd dress, or shall make any indecent exposure of his or her person, or be guilty of any lewd or indecent act or behavior, or shall exhibit or perform any indecent, immoral or lewd play, or other representation, he should be guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction, shall pay a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars." (Stryker 46).

²⁷ Accessed through <https://www.army.mil/women/history/> (section Women in the Army).

Chapter 2

Decolonizing (gendered) Being

2.1 Introduction: Trans Time

History is full of new beginnings. Am I not the one - or exactly like the one – the Lord designated for you? How about fooling around until the second coming?... (ANA 212)

Finding himself outcasted by hetero-colonial history, the trans* artist is in a state of readiness for “new beginnings”; this however comes with the realization that the damage has already been done to the expense of marginalized subjects, and the acceptance of a “new” (false) arche will not erase the colonial past. Claude Cahun thus refuses to accept in idleness, the idea of a postcolonial, post-gendered society, but would rather “fool around” with the master’s tools until he breaks into the master’s house (ANA 212). The decolonial strategy that he deploys, the different *performances* that he embodies, is in fact prevalent in all of his autobiographical works, and can be briefly introduced with the following passage from *Aveux Non Avenus*:

If ever it happens that I believe in a god outside myself, at certain times it seems to me that he has got the upper hand: having eternity before him. With his means at their disposal any murderer, innocent, prostitute, the bottom of their class, the lowest of men, could equal him, could easily topple him from his throne... yes, saved from the intolerable distractions of misery, love, illnesses, and at the same time allowed to take *my time*, I’d feel like his equal... (ANA 207 emphasis added)

Cahun admits here that he identifies with what the dominant ideology considers “the bottom of their class”, that is, a murderer, who is also innocent, a prostitute, and generally, anyone who occupies the lowest place in the social pyramid (ANA 207). It is however from this very marginal position that he is able to overthrow colonial institutions. Moreover, by alluding to *his* time, the surrealist artist guides the reader towards the philosophical field of phenomenology, which deals with the concept of time

and identity production as phenomena, and not as concrete, teleological entities, as they are perceived in hetero-colonial/essentialist terms. At the same time, behind the purposeful ambiguity and fragmentation of his words, the poet admits that it is precisely the fact that he has “eternity before him” that composes his advantage over the teleologically unified laws of God, western-science and the law; the word “before” here referring simultaneously to a temporal past and a spatial future, prepares the reader for a problematization of the linearity of time. In order thus to appreciate the decolonial potential of Cahun’s *narcissistic* and *prosthetic* performances, one needs to observe how the artist problematizes the duration of time in the presentation of his identity/identities.

2.2 Gender Fails because the Mirror Stage Fails (Again)

To the glory of Freud. (ANA 155)

It might appear somewhat predictable or even redundant to activate psychoanalytic theory in reference to the work of a Surrealist artist, given the known preoccupation of Surrealists with the writings of Freud. Cahun himself who “moved in the same circles as Jacques Lacan” (Gen 59) was indeed very interested in psychoanalysis, with concepts like the mirror, narcissism, and the search for a “self” being recurrent motifs in both his written and photographic works. It would be however a contradiction to (psycho)analyze Cahun’s work through a kind of discourse which has been overtly promoting and consolidating misogyny, homophobia and transphobia,¹ merely to prove how it can be applied (again) upon trans* bodies. At the same time, I am not suggesting that this analysis extends to a deconstruction of psychoanalysis as a whole; it is rather a re-appropriation of specific parts of psychoanalytical theory, and especially, the Mirror Stage, which was put forward by Jacques Lacan eight years after Cahun produced one of his prominent works: the Self-Portrait with the mirror (Figure 3). The Mirror stage is described by Lacan as a process of *identification* for a child, before they reach the age of 18 months; by looking at themselves in the mirror, the child engages with “a series of gestures in which he [sic] experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex

and the reality it reduplicates - the child's own body, and the persons and things, around him [sic]" (Rivkin and Ryan 442). Lacan is describing here how the child realizes the *possession* of their own identity which is however based on the false impression that they are looking at their Ideal-I. I am thus inclined to read several parts of Cahun's work, including his Self-Portrait with the mirror and the first photomontage that he interpolates within *ANA*, as figurative returns to the Mirror Stage, to different moments in his life where identity is supposedly possessed.



Figure 2: Claude Cahun, Self-portrait with Mirror, 10.7 x 8.2 cms, 1928, JHT.

We are referring to multiple returns (plural) which is already a (re)activation² of different temporalities. In *ANA*, the only two dates mentioned, in Judeo-Christian time, the 21st of September 1920 and the 20th of September 1920, will give the reader the false promise of temporal normativity and linearity. This is however not the case, since the

author completely disrupts our perception of time by offering conflicting facts about his age:

Am I not twenty six years old? - No! Already!

- Not yet, Lord! I'm only ninety. Admit that it would be premature to judge my work, this rough sketch of body and soul. (ANA 47)

The artist engages here in a play of identity possession, which satirizes the “natural” process of aging according to hetero-colonial criteria, and which is juxtaposed to his own, trans experience with time. Later on, he will tease the reader into believing that he finally reveals his “true” age “You’re mistaken: I was twenty seven last October” (ANA 83) only to surrender again to “absurdity” by saying: “The poor child has aged a whole year” (ANA 90). If he was 26 years old and now he is 27, then he is indeed a year older; but little does this matter since the author identifies here as a child, possibly what hetero-colonial discourse would define as his younger/past self, and which is in fact, a recurrent motif in his novel, namely, a recurrent deconstruction of the reader’s perception of time. A similar result is effected in Cahun’s photomontage (Figure 3) where he presents different moments of his life/ performances that he has embodied, stemming from a child-presumably his younger self- and leaving the spectator to wonder: what is the temporal/logical sequence of these performances?

In yet another passage in his novel, Cahun further problematizes the linearity of identity acquisition and production, while confronting an instance of the psychoanalytic, transphobic discourse. Specifically, he refuses the interpretation of his problematic relationship with his mother (which many scholars have pointed out without deconstructing it³) to be reduced to yet another instance of the Oedipus complex, what trans* people are, for Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, unable to resolve:⁴

- News: A child has been killed in the parish of Guerande, thirty...rrrr... three years old: Yves Claudanac. Information on the murderer, 26, rue Saint-Antoine. A reward is offered. While this was going on I saw all the spectators’ suspicions manifest themselves, feature by feature on the drum-skin, as if on a taut magic lantern screen, fade then re-appear: the notorious thugs of the neighbourhood, one of the child’s uncles, who stood to inherit, and then the mother herself. The image of this lady persisted, disappearing

one minute only to come back in a reconstruction of an imagined throat-slitting the next. This woman, passionate, irreligious and not much of a gossip, was taken for a madwoman in the area. She drew strange looks and prejudice. Since evidence of her innocence was not forthcoming, she was charged and imprisoned, while she repeated in a monotonous tone - like a cow ruminating - really having lost her head on this occasion:

- Yes it was I who sent him to his death! (ANA 31-32)

In this scene of murder that Cahun narrates, he is both the victim and the murderer, the child and the mother. The undefinable temporality of this passage, as well as the ambiguous reference to a “woman” that has committed a crime does not allow the reader to make a distinction between a character that is his biological mother and the character that was his effeminate performance. The author thus stages a rather unorthodox resolution of what psychoanalysis would describe as his Oedipal complex, by performing the role of the mother and the child at the same time. Taking this a step further, the assumption of this double identity can be read as a metaphor of how trans people are giving birth to ourselves; this rebirth is not however a painless process for the trans* subject who confesses that his “past self” had to walk “to the guillotine” in order to kill off the performance (of being a woman) that does not fit, or rather, was imposed on him:

This was taken for a confession. And the Claudanac girl walked to the guillotine as if she was heading for the Promised Land, laughing through her tears...- ‘It’s good she was condemned,’ someone said. ‘She was only pretending to be mad.’ What did this woman have left to live for? Yes, she was pretending, the crowd was right. (ANA 33)

Cahun addresses here how the violence involved in this moment of rebirth is mostly the result of the hetero-patriarchal public discourse (including the institution of psychiatry, religion and the law) which “condemns” his existence and reduces it to madness. What is more, another element, crucial for our analysis emerges here: the author does not restrict his narration only to the realm of memory. In fact, in the opening lines where he introduces the scene of the crime, he uses the present tense, while imitating the tone and structure of a news report, creating a contingent relationship between past and present: “A reward is offered” (ANA 32). The artist showcases here how

his “past” (re)enters his present, agreeing thus with Sartre’s observation that “the three so-called “elements” of time, past, present, and future, should not be considered as a collection of “givens” for us to sum up—for example, as an infinite series of “nows” in which some are not yet and others are no longer—but rather as the structured moments of an original synthesis” (Sartre 177). In fact, in another part of *ANA*, in an internal monologue, Cahun asks himself “What do you fear?” and “C” answers “The past beginning all over again” (*ANA* 70-71). The poet demonstrates here how the past is always present, especially for transgender subjects who will always be exposed to public violence and state injustice within liberal democracies: the public/state knowledge of our past performance- like for example our deadname or our given pronouns- can be used at the present moment (and will always be incubating as a potentiality of the future) guarantying a never-ending cycle of trauma, manifesting as a forceful return to the past, in a specifically violent version of it. If I am re-entering the past, this means that the past still exists! This defies Bergson’s idea of the past as something that is inactive, which “can only remain behind and will never come to penetrate the present in the form of memory” (Sartre 206).

The problematization of the concept of time further complicates the theorization of identity production; If time is not even concrete and linear, then how could identity production (and even gender identity) be something as concrete and linear as to be reflected in front of a mirror? Before however we attempt to approach this question, it is necessary to return to psychoanalytical thought in order to interrogate the involvement of *consciousness* in the process of identity formation; is Sartre’s For-itself (similar term to Lacan’s ego) able to create “being”, to have agency over being, meaning that it is capable of *sustaining* the acts that produce it? Lacan’s answer to this question would be a definitive “no” since, the Ego is already a site of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) in the Mirror Stage. Towards a similar direction, Cahun utilizes the “mirror” in order to expose its limitations:

Mirror, that seems more cruel to me the more I burn and which refuses me the comfort of my reflection. Red which never overflows this mouth whose muscles never weaken. But won’t each of its infinitely varied movements be always a new, always a similar rejection? (*ANA* 164)

The mirror, for Cahun, cannot go beyond appearance as a "sign" of one's momentary performance (limited to one or a few gender expressions) and as such it could never reflect his being (the multitudes of his existence) which we have shown as something that extends through time. This refusal of his reflection that he mentions here, is literally performed by the artist in his *Self-Portrait*, where he looks at the camera instead of the mirror. In fact, this "turning away" from the mirror, in a pre-directed (and not a spontaneous) pose, proves that the artist is aware that the Mirror Stage is destined to fail⁵; thus, this is not a narcissistic attempt to unite with his Ideal-I, but a parody of narcissism and the unifying mirror. In another passage in *ANA* he provides further evidence of how the mirror will never be able to offer a reflection of one's *in-it-self*; it will always be limited to a distorted image of one's self, a mere manifestation of the for-itself:

In front. I imprison myself. I make myself blind. What does it matter to me, Passer-by, if I provide you with a mirror to see yourself in, all be it a distorting mirror and *signed by my own hand*? (*ANA* 38, emphasis added)

The action of signing is inevitably reserved to the realm of consciousness; Cahun seems to agree with Sartre that the for-itself will never get to know the in-itself, precisely because the fist will always be limited by consciousness. This is why the artist admits that there is no such thing as an ideal self that Narcissus desperately has been seeking, precisely because the mirror will never reflect the *totality* of his being:

. . . what makes Narcissus despair is not that he cannot drink himself, nor the solid, infrangible mirror-bound space, the coldness that separates the window from the image. Between him and himself something else exists to be smashed. Always a quarter moon, never fullness. Always a partial clarity. (*ANA* 48)

A logical question can be raised here: if the mirror will always offer a "partial clarity." always restricting the for-itself to the realm of consciousness, to a momentary performance, then why have we been mobilizing it for the theorization of being? The very limitations of the mirror, the inability to transcend time and consciousness, allows trans* existence to look for being elsewhere; what is this "something else" that needs to "be smashed"? (*ANA* 45).



Figure 3. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, photomontage, *Aveux Non Avenus*, Plate II, 1930.

Cahun's work has been proven effective in uncovering the impossibility of identity production to take place within the realm of consciousness. And since the problematization of "gender identity" (a term that I have purposefully avoided) which is also a kind of identity, is a central theme in *ANA* and Cahun's Self-portraits, I would like to discuss how the limitation of consciousness posits a particular difficulty in the theorization of gender, as something other than a false-arche.

Gender identity or in phenomenological terms, the phenomenon of feeling that or the other gender, is "an abstraction since it must 'appear' to consciousness" (*BN* 71). As a

result, this supposedly concrete and fixed phenomenon that is gender identity, can only be produced by consciousness/ found within consciousness. This is why Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, speaks of a “gendered essence” (the meaning of the feeling of gender) which is manufactured through a *sustained* set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (Preface xv). The verb “manufactured” here, in the passive voice, discloses the identification of the actor, while it excludes the possibility of what Sartre calls a “self-activated” or “passive existence; that is, existence which perpetuates itself without having the force either to produce itself or to preserve itself” (57). Furthermore, the parameter of sustainability necessarily raises some questions: if gender is to be thought as a “kind of becoming or activity, and . . . not as a noun or substantial thing or static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort” (Butler 152) then what kind of actions do I need to repeat in order to “become” a certain gender? Is this repetition only reserved for the realm of consciousness and if so, what if I am unconsciously performing gender(ed) acts that are not mine/ in alignment with the for-itself? Finally, how is a gender(ed) act (temporally) sustained?

It would be perhaps a futile project to trace the answers to these inquiries in Cahun’s oeuvre, which was completed long before the sex-gender distinction was theorized. It is however capable of interrogating the element of sustainability and thus pushing the Butlerian theory towards its limitations:

I only believe in the monsters I’ve created myself, I will only believe in the Messiah who comes down for me in me, made to measure and incomparable. Inability to imagine anything concrete, proper nouns for example. Love of abstraction, symbols (*ANA* 67).

This reference to “proper nouns” alludes to what several thinkers have described as “proper names.” Cahun’s “inability to imagine anything concrete” resembles Derrida’s critique towards proper names: “the so-called proper, substitute of the deferred proper, perceived by the social and moral consciousness as the proper, the reassuring seal of self-identity, the secret” (Derrida 112). For Cahun, thus, gender would be classified as a “proper name,” as a false-arche created within consciousness, and as such, it will never be proper or concrete. This is why his alternating performances should not be read as different performances of gender (or different genders) but rather as an extended parody

of the concept of gender. In his surrealist photomontage (Figure 3) for instance, the artist parodies the idea that one should repeat specific gender acts in order to assume a specific gender identity, by presenting different performances of “masculinity” and “femininity”⁶ (which he has cut from previous works of his) emerging from him as a child, and which are multiplied to an arbitrary number of “copies.” These copies are, in fact, “immune” to the process of aging. This is Cahun’s way to explain how trans* existence parodies the linearity of hetero-colonial time. Most importantly however, it showcases how trans* existence refuses to conform with gender performativity: his masculine and feminine performances do not appear to age as they sustain a set of (gendered) acts. In fact, the entire image is reduplicated arbitrarily, and thus, the performance can be stopped at any point.

Cahun is thus embracing the uncertainty and undecidability which characterize the Dadaist movement and applying it in the concept of the For-itself’s performances of masculinity and femininity; he refuses to choose among one or the other (proper name) and to sustainably act them out in order to prove the validity of his experience. What is more, in *ANA* there is further evidence of the artist’s rejection of the idea of fixing the image of an identity (not to mention many of them) in a specific moment:

Now would be the moment to fix the image in time as it is in space, to seize completed movements - surprise oneself from behind. ‘Mirror’, ‘fix’, these are words that have no place here. In fact what troubles Narcissus the voyeur most is insufficiency, when his own gaze is interrupted. (*ANA* 46)

If we transpose this concept of fixity of an image that Cahun refers to, to the discussion of gender identity (which requires a certain fixity in order to be sustained) we may assume that Cahun would agree that the performativity of gender is in fact a fallacy: the mirror will never reflect one’s gender (as a facet of being) back at them, because the mirror will only capture one “moment” of how the For-itself perceives its being. This means that gender-if it were capable of signifying something- its signification would never go beyond the reflection of the mirror, the different iterations of the for-itself and it will always be limited to the realm of consciousness, which is not the realm where being exists. This is why I have been referring to “moments” of performances so far, which are in fact not moments of identity but merely the essence⁷ of identity.

It would be however a logical leap to conclude that Cahun's work uncovers that identity/essence is already there, without a (conscious or unconscious) re-iteration of gendered acts, to justify its existence. The artist himself has expressed his confusion around the true nature of being, although he has not felt compelled to clearly identify it:

There are as many ways of being as there are stars; I wouldn't know what more to say... Even if there were so much in each star (is it my fault if the absolute is beyond comprehension?) it will not make one more. (ANA 123)

It thus becomes apparent that Cahun refuses to accept a teleological modality of being, to settle for a known and consistent repetition of gendered acts. This is why Cahun's performances (and not the Butlerian performativity) are merely manifestations of how the for-itself perceives its being, and consequently they will never be being. Perhaps "being" is too absolute, like God, and as such it will remain beyond comprehension. If this is the case, we may argue that instead of wondering "how being is produced" we might benefit more by asking; What can we create instead?

2.3 Narcissistic Performance as a Parody of God and Gender

Having interacted with the limitations of the narcissistic mirror in reference to identity production, it would be counterproductive (and not the Foucauldian kind) to return to a mere presentation of Cahun's narcissistic performances just to point out that "Cahun is sympathetic to Narcissus, sorry for his plight" (NeoNarcissism 22) or even worse, to conclude that Cahun was a narcissist. This would in fact falsely validate the pathologizing and transphobic arguments which were intrinsic to the origins of psychoanalysis and which are still offered as legitimized theories by certain mental-health professionals, as is the case with Colette Chiland; "In 2003, the psychoanalyst Colette Chiland asserted that, faced with the impossibility of overcoming the reality of the sex and gender binary, transsexuals present a 'borderline state' that leads them to lapse into pathology akin to 'narcissistic fantasy'." (Preciado 44) If we erase the words "overcoming" from this thought pattern, and replace "pathology" with the phrase "decolonial strategy", we are left with what the majority of Cahun's work is aimed

towards. Having accepted “gender” as a false-arche and as something unsustainable, the trans* subject would rather “lapse into” a narcissistic performance to *parody* the self-proclaimed “absolute” and “ideal” entities, as is the case with god, in order to subvert the hetero-patriarchal narrative that has oppressed and colonized him:

Everyone carries the weight of their own virtues. I cannot commit someone else’s sins. I burden myself with them fruitlessly, offer myself to the holocaust, through a martyr’s or an actor’s vanity prolong my role as others’ replicas, in rebellions that are those of my fellow human beings, that are not mine, if I - consciously - try to modify my being, make it more acceptable, my most vile crimes will be considered virtues, somewhere, in God’s empty heaven. (ANA 188)

The phrase “consciously modify my being” alludes to the perception that Being is nothing beyond the Ego, which forces the author’s “fellow human beings” towards a quest of an absolute justification of existence. Cahun criticizes trans, queer, and even straight people who are trying to fit in the constructed narrative of transness, queerness and straightness and the conscious performativity of gender and who, like believers of God, they derive their meaning from “God ”or a gender that they desperately sustain. They are thus choosing to be assimilated within the God/gender-dominated hetero-colonial regime, the very system that “has determined” each person’s “essence” and “then left him [sic] to act freely in accordance with the demands of his [sic] essence” (BN Barnes 30). As Barnes rightfully argues however, in *Being and Nothingness*, “if the creature is still inwardly dependent on God, then he [sic] is not separate, not free, not an independent existent” (30). In opposition thus to queer and straight assimilatory politics, trans* existance assumes the role of “a martyr or the actor” and invites the reader to:

Watch out for alternatives!

The poet has to sacrifice himself twice: for himself and for the other.
(Sentence needs rewriting).

The poet has to be ready to sacrifice his life twice:

For the love of art - his work, posterity, the king of Prussia... but when it comes down to it he’s a man like everyone else: for you, for himself, for the first to arrive. (ANA 197)

Cahun's sacrifice alludes here to the sacrifice of Christ, although in his case, the sacrifice is double: The first sacrifice refers to his transition, to the role that he had to abandon in order to live towards a more authentic self. The second one is due to his role as a political activist, who voluntarily enters the space of vulnerability in order to subvert the colonial narratives. This second sacrifice explains why he is willing to "burden" himself with "someone else's sins" meaning that he is willing to face the *anguish* (and the uncertainty) which is intrinsic to the assertion of our freedom. For Sartre

anguish has not appeared to us as a proof of human freedom; the latter was given to us as the necessary condition for the question. We wished only to show that there exists a specific consciousness of freedom, and we wished to show that this consciousness is anguish. This means that we wished to establish anguish in its essential structure as consciousness of freedom. (102)

This means that even within the realm of consciousness (which has been proved limiting for accessing being) the trans* artist activates the revolutionary element of anguish, as a way of interrogating absolute concepts. This is why, trans* existence refuses to "prolong [his]role as others' replicas" (ANA 197). In fact, Cahun, in another passage in his novel criticizes the assumption of a supposedly "concrete" (gender) identity, as something that perpetuates the coloniality of (gendered) being:

. . . cemetery invaded by rye-grass which you refuse to tear up or which you even sow along with the good grain, alone - are you so sure that you love yourself, sure that you can be self-sufficient? Alone – which you declare: being free, you who forge the bars of your own prison. (ANA 183)

The author refers here to the false promise of assimilation of marginal subjects to the status quo and the hetero-colonial regime; they will never be "self-sufficient" if they depend on absolute concepts, like gender, to justify their existence. In fact, by "sow[ing] along with the good grain" of late capitalism, the transgressive bodies will never activate their revolutionary anguish, to "tear up" the seeds of patriarchy and hetero-colonialism and perform their resistance towards systemic oppression. For Cahun, in fact, this resistance is necessary and possible, despite the presumably unbending, divine absolutism of god/gender:

If I neglect the facts that annoy me, if I pretend to scorn life, it's because the unreal permits one to take all kinds of liberties. The abstract, the absolute, the absurd, are a malleable element, a plastic material, the word one appropriates. That is all for me alone. And so, at ease, I associate, dissociate - and formulate without laughing the odious rule of my collection of exceptions. (ANA 174)

The word unreal, refers to false-arches, to the absolute concepts (like god or gender) which prevent the revolutionary subject to “take all kinds of liberties” (ANA 174). In fact, according to Barnes, “either man is free and does not derive his meaning from God, or he is dependent on God and not free” (BN 30). But because the artist cannot simply erase god out of the equation of coloniality—colonialism has already happened—in order to “deal with the absolute” (ANA 42) he will “become” the Creator in yet another one of his narcissistic performances:

I am (the “I” is) the outcome of God multiplied by God divided by God:

$$\frac{\text{God x God}}{\text{GOD}} = \text{me} = \text{God}$$

God is presented here as yet another role that Cahun embodies; The first God signifies how god made humans “according to his image,” multiplied by all the different performances one can embody (second God). These two are subtracted by GOD (in capital letters) signifying the coloniality of religion (and consequently gender) which fragments the trans* body, and pushes it to renounce the religious (gender) absolutism, by fueling its “anguish.” From this place of anguish, the transgressing body is left to assume the role of god, of the creator, in order to define itself or rather, reinvent itself; (Therein some ways to deal with the absolute! One can see that...etc...) (ANA 42) The phrase “one can see that” implies that the author realizes the limitations of his narcissistic performance; What he writes can never be as “objective” and total as God. This is however not a disadvantage: God (like gender) is an absolute, finalized, unchangeable concept (due to its perfection, there is no room for alterations) in contrast to the infinite possibilities of trans* existence; a positionality and a political stance which is capable of questioning the coloniality of (gendered) being, even within the realm of consciousness:

In whom to trust, Lord?

If he deceives us (whatever he is), if he makes just one mistake, we lose our faith. But if, in a thousand gropings, I should once put my finger on God, (at the bottom of my heart and even if I tell myself not to) then I become a prophet. (ANA 42-43)

God is here presented as a metaphor for “Being” which is

not one ‘structure among others,’ one moment of the object; it is the very condition of all structures and of all moments. It is the ground on which the characteristics of the phenomenon will manifest themselves. (Sartre 82)

The trans artist has so far admitted that no one can possibly retain “all structures and all moments” -what composes the limitation of the for-itself- and consequently, there is not a pure moment of Being.⁸ Similarly, thus to Sartre and Derrida, trans* existence is not in pursuit of a false-arche of Being; Cahun specifically is more interested in putting once his “finger in God,” merely experimenting with Being. This performative experimentation however, allows the revolutionary artist to “become the prophet” of a non-religious order, which in Paul Preciado’s terms is described as a *countersexual revolution*.

2.4 Prosthetic Performance as a Parody of Sex and Gender

For those who have not been satisfied with their role on earth, God establishes a review panel:

I provide the theatre, you choose your stage sets, your adventures, your character, your sex, your make-up... but the false accents you’ll have used on stage will be reproduced eternally; and if you’ve kept your personality at bay, he’ll let you have it back. Never having known how to let yourself be moved by your soul, you will never know how to touch it either. Strangers to yourselves, ridiculously followed or preceded by a marionette four regulation steps away... (ANA 146)

Coming across passages like this, I am inclined to read Cahun’s work as the early, trans* “theatre” of Paul Preciado’s *countersexual society*. This new society, imagined

almost 60 years after the publication of *Disavowals*, “takes the name ‘countersexual’ for at least two reasons. First, negatively: countersexual society is committed to the systematic deconstruction of naturalized sexual practices and the gender system” (Preciado 21). Secondly, because it counter-produces⁹ “protocols and forms of pleasure–knowledge as alternatives to the disciplines of the modern sexual regime” (Preciado 21). Cahun who is still embracing his narcissistic performance, emerges here as a countersexual God and invites his contemporaries and his readers to resist becoming marionettes in hetero-colonial choreographies and embrace their countersexuality; through this new role, “sex,” like “make-up,” is treated as something that one gets to choose (*ANA* 146). And because sex in hetero-patriarchal discourse is falsely used to signify one’s reproductive organs, at the same time that psychoanalytic thought propounds that the unification with the self will only be realized at the moment of birth and death (that is, again, in essentialist terms) the trans* artist chooses the womb, as one of the decolonizing sites, where de-naturalization takes place.

Trans* existence, which is an apriori shift away from biological determinism, does not settle for what Freud conceives as a return to the security of the womb; this is the (sexed) organ that is predefined and regulated by the heterocolonial institutions, and that is measured according to its procreational capacity, although this is not (and should) not be presupposed. It is this very organ than Luce Irigaray’s *speculum* failed to decolonize, because it only reflected what thinkers (and gynecologists) of the time wanted to see; a “female” organ. As a result, it would never be a secure place for the transgressive subject who has no “nostalgic desire to regain the lost paradise of oneness with nature” (*BN* 32). In the surrealist work of Claude Cahun, this rejection of “nature” and of the “myth” of the healing womb is primarily exemplified in the last photomontage of *ANA*: (Figure 4) In the top half of the plate, the artist displays an array of five, genderless matryoshka dolls, impregnated with human babies and fetuses, which become progressively smaller as they fade into the background. The dissonance between the human babies and the wooden doll, as well as the reappropriation of the traditional “female” gender¹⁰ of the matryoshka doll, into genderless dolls, represents the coldness and the hostility of the womb towards the trans* subject who has rejected biological determinism and has staged his own rebirth (as we have previously shown through the scene of the crime). What is more, the question

Figure 4. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, photomontage, *Aveux Non Avenus*, Plate X, 1930.

Inspired by the artificiality of the dildo which, like a prosthetic organ comes to replace the phallogocentrism of the “biological” penis, and constructs the *materiality* of the body, Preciado concludes that gender is prosthetic. We have already rejected gender as a category, but that does not posit a difficulty in applying the concept of prosthesis to Cahun’s performances/iterations of the for-itself. According to Preciado, “the prosthesis’s borderline condition shows the impossibility of drawing a clear line between ‘the natural’ and ‘the artificial,’ between ‘the body’ and ‘the machine’” which is exactly the effect of Cahun’s use of make-up and the mask (135):

I remember, it was Carnival. I had spent my solitary hours disguising my soul. Its *masks* were so perfect that when their paths crossed in the grand square of my consciousness they didn’t recognize each other. Beguiled by their comic ugliness, I explored the worst possible instincts; I welcomed young monsters into myself and nurtured them. But the *makeup* I had used seemed indelible. I rubbed so hard to remove it that I took off all the skin. And my soul, like a flayed face, naked, no longer had a human form. (*ANA* 25-26 emphasis added)

In his attempt to remove his make-up, Cahun ends up taking off his skin, implying that his body becomes less human. In fact, make-up is presented here as part of his body, and specifically as a “prosthetic” instrument that questions the divide between nature and artifice. A similar outcome is effected through Cahun’s photomontage (Figure 4) where he presents an array of masks and human heads (some of which are his own) stemming out of a single human neck! This grotesque image, shakes the viewer out of his field of familiarity and forces them to reject any predetermined notion about “naturalness.” In fact, the “natural” (head) here merges with the “artificial” (mask) into an outcome that is totally “unnatural,” namely a head with two rows of heads. The artificial here, takes the place of the natural, an idea that is further propounded by the phrase that accompanies the surrealist collage: “Sous ce masque un autre masque. Je ? 'en finirai pas de soulever tous ces visages.” (“Under this mask, another mask. I will never finish lifting up all of these faces”). For Cahun thus, the use of make-up, as well as the mask, calls to question, like

Preciado's dildo, "the idea that the limits of the flesh coincide with the limits of the body" (73) contradicting thus, Corinne Andersen's claim that "the viewer can easily separate Cahun the artist from the persona ~~she~~ he plays" (45). What is more, in contrast with the limited and static encapsulations (of identity) that the traditional, biologically determined matryoshka doll can perform, Cahun's masquerades, as a kind of prosthesis, enables trans* existence to experiment with unlimited performances, unlimited iterations of the for-itself. In fact as Cahun explains in another passage of *ANA*: "If you dared to look at it up close, this face would be nothing more than a mask; the body made of straw to the specifications of the most common taste and changing whenever it wishes" (*ANA* 129). For, Cahun thus, as for Sartre, "the body is the for-itself" and is capable of "changing whenever it wishes" through the prosthetic performance. Or more accurately, the for-itself (the face) cannot be but prosthetic (a mask); in other words, prosthetic performance is all there is.

Taking that into account, the countersexual reader is invited to approach *Aveux Non Avenus*, as well as the majority of Cahun's works, as an "avowal of artifice" and as an extended disavowal of anything fixed and absolute (*ANA* 38):

With the fragments, make a stained-glass window. Byzantine work. Transparency, opacity. What an avowal of artifice! I will always end up pronouncing my own sentence. I told you: look at the sign - guillotine window... (*ANA* 38)

This passage can be read as a metaphor for the artificiality of the trans* post-body, which will not hesitate to perform his own "sentence" in order to break away from his biologically determined self. At the same time, however by "pronouncing his own sentence" the countersexual author alludes to a "different kind of vocabulary" that carries within it the "opacity" of the in-itself, but does not surrender to the hetero-colonial discourse of gender(ed) being;

Make myself another vocabulary, brighten the silvering on the mirror, wink, swindle myself, improve my skeleton with a fluke muscle, correct my faults and copy my actions, divide myself to rule myself, multiply myself so I can make my mark, in short: make a mockery of ourselves - that can't change

anything. Anyway, stroke me up the wrong way like yesterday and always - no, that doesn't change anything. (ANA 225)

Trans* existence, as a kind of linguistic prosthesis, accepts fragmentation (or non-linearity) as part of one's performance of identity; Inspired by Cahun's work, it is expressed as an alternative to the fixed and consistent repetition of (gendered) acts which is offered as evidence that validates our experience. At the same time, Cahun, as an actor of trans* existence, does not pretend to have overcome the limitations of consciousness by "making his mark" nor does he resort to a totalizing nihilism by simply declaring "that doesn't change anything." (ANA 225) He does not conclude that there is no revolutionary outcome to be derived by constantly engaging in countersexual practices and problematizing the hetero-colonial values:

P.S. - a new position for loving myself, for hating myself, a new contact was finally put within reach, at my mercy: An image of the world formed from truths that stick out a mile, a psychology, a morality, painted in trompe l'âme. A religion as large as life in pasteboard, grapes your pigeon would shatter its beak on... or if you deserve better: a more real order of things (or at least more plausible) than the chaos our senses bear false witness to. (ANA 225)

This more real order of things that Cahun mentions here, and which becomes accessible through the realization of one's trans* existence, resembles Preciado's *somatic communism*; According to Preciado, "the only way to global mutation today is to construct a planetary somatic communism, a communism of (all) living bodies within and together with the earth" (13). In the word communism, echoes the (spectral) legacy of Marxism, while the adjective planetary stresses the need to overcome the limitations of geopolitically localized struggles of resistance. The second adjective, somatic, alludes to a revolution that starts from the body; Specifically, a countersexual body, that goes against the normative heterosexual choreographies, practicing in a way, self-government by opposing religious absolutism and by resisting naturalized and assimilationist sexual and gender practices. Trans* existence highlights that this is in fact a plausible, yet a not easily realizable project and Cahun himself, prepares his countersexual readers for this by stating:

Start again. Connections, repairs, reiterations, incoherence, so what! Provided that something else continually comes along. Work essentially obscene and destined to pass through the hands of all viable new-borns - however protected or nauseated they are in the crib. (*ANA* 226)

Cahun refuses thus to announce here an “all viable” solution of emancipation that is only reserved for a discontinuous present; As his words “I believe, but in the conditional: I would like to believe” suggests, he is referring to the legacy of trans* existence (*ANA* 227); It starts by interrogating a violent past and manifests as a potentiality for the subversive and outcasted bodies in the future, to liberate ourselves from the coloniality of (gendered) being.

Notes

¹ The transgender philosopher Paul Preciado has also been critical of the transphobic rhetoric of psychoanalysis in his book *Can the Monster Speak?*: “For Lacan, transsexuals are psychotic, victims of an error of ‘mistaking the organ for the signifier.’ It is possible to get rid of the organ, but it is impossible to get rid of the symbolic ‘signifier’ of sexuation which, according to him, divides all creatures into male and female. As trans people, he claims, we suffer from a semiotic illness: we don’t understand the difference between symbolic castration and real castration, between a vagina and a simple orifice, between a ‘phallus’ and some random fleshy appendage; we just don’t get it” (43). This of course does not come as a surprise given the fact that, as Halberstam writes in the Preface of the *Countersexual Manifesto*, “neither Freud nor Lacan could imagine a non-object form of non- male masculinity” (xiv).

² The parenthesis here indicates that some of these temporalities belong to the realm that in hetero-colonial time is understood as past, while others reside in the present and future accordingly.

³ Gen Doy in fact engages in a kind of ableist discourse in order to justify their problematic relationship: “Cahun’s relationship with her mother was damaged by the latter’s mental illness and final internment in a Parisian psychiatric clinic, which has given rise to speculations about Cahun’s own psychic development, as well as suspected periods of anorexia” (30).

⁴ In the works of Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, the desire of trans people to change their physical appearance stems from a failure to resolve the Oedipus complex, and the perverse propensity to regress to the pregenital state (Preciado 43).

⁵ I am thus inclined disagree here with Shaw who claims that “Cahun’s interest in the mirror is quite different from Lacan’s” (NeoNarcissism 25).

⁶ The quotation marks here are necessary since the terms masculinity and femininity are also subject to deconstruction, as false-arches, whose traces we are able to trace in all moments of history where masculinity and femininity were signified differently. A case in point is the false signification of wearing heels as a feminine act, with heels being primarily worn by men cavaliers in the 10th century.

⁷ “The essence is not in the object; it is the meaning of the object, the principle of the series of appearances which disclose it.” (Sartre 50)

⁸ This is what Hengel tried to theorize yet was never able to trace.

⁹ The term “countersexuality” that Preciado uses comes indirectly from Michel Foucault’s “counterproductivity”.

¹⁰ Traditionally the outer layer of the Matryoshka dolls is a woman, perhaps representing the mother (in essentialist terms) while the figures inside may be of any gender.

Conclusion

Theatre, according to Apollinaire “shouldn't be trompe l'oeil art' or a snapshot of life, but should be its own universe - a carnival domain where fiction reigns and where the laws of the real are systematically banished” (Welby-Everard 6). Reading the word “theatre” in its spatial sense (whatever that means) we may argue that in the surrealist work of Claude Cahun, it becomes the setting where “the laws of the real are systematically” manifesting themselves, as the colonial forces that oppress and silence the queer, trans* artist. Theatre, also, as a kind of action (that the actor does), or rather, as a narcissistic or prosthetic performance, palimpsestuously interrogates these colonial forces, that enabled the legitimation of trans* marginality, not only in 20th century, but throughout the past four centuries. We may even argue that theatre replaces “real” life, in a similar way that for a countersexual artist prosthetic performance replaces gendered being; This decolonial approach towards being, not only defies the hetero-patriarchal discourse of western medicine, religion and the law; It also problematizes the theoretical contradictions of the 3rd wave feminist vocabulary and pushes it towards its limitations; holding on to a constructed category such as gender (as opposed to “biological sex”), may result to “a more equitable redistribution of violence” (*Can the Monster Speak?* 17) and thus it will never be able to confront the (false) origins of this violence. If our goal is to renegotiate the coloniality of (gendered) being, our scope needs to be wider than that: “Ça oblige le lecteur à faire tout seul un pas de plus qu’il ne voudrait. On a soigneusement bloqué toutes les sorties, mais la porte d’entrée, on lui laisse le soin de l’ouvrir” (Cahun 5). This approach that Cahun proposes-the entrance in a reality where feminism and the prosthetic materiality of trans existence are not mutually exclusive- is indeed more pessimistic-yet also more interceptive (and intrceptive) approach to Paul Preciado’s somatic communism, which is merely the “exit door” from gender oppression. Cahun’s trans* existence, showcases how liberation starts when the subversive body enters, full of anguish, the zone of oppression, not to be contaminated by the dominant ideology, but to transmute his dispossession into sociopolitical reformation: “La liberté des moeurs, des droits de l’être humaine, opprimé par des siècles de superstitions féroces, [qui]

m'importaient personnellement.” Trans* existence is not simply against the depoliticization of life; it openly denounces the “highly juridified states of dispossession” (*Who Sings the Nation State* 42) which are legitimized (and simultaneously legitimizing) the discourse of cure. Similarly to Clare, trans* existence counter-demands: “civil rights, equal access, gainful employment, the opportunity to live independently, good and respectful health care, unsegregated education” rather than a medical [or religious] cure (60). Such a claim comes however with the realization that the countersexual revolution does not start or stop in the island of Jersey; Trans* existence seeks and creates transnational (and transhistorical) networks of resistance and agency, inside and outside the tight borders of the nation-state, and forces us to rethink them. As a stance, it refuses to Sing (again) the Nation-State or dance along the choreographies of linguistic majorities and for this reason, it does not simply make a “disruptive return” to the epistemology of gender. It rather renegotiates the very limits of discursive legitimacy, highlighting the problem around the discourse of human rights and makes the countersexual reader wonder: has it really protected anyone? The more countersexual readers engage in this kind of anarcheology, denaturalizing the different aches of (neo)colonial practices, including transphobia, the more likely they are to take action against the different shades of fascism, to the point that texts like this are rendered unnecessary.

Appendix

A Trans-historical Chronology

The majority of these of these historical references come from Suzan Stryker's book *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. The numbers in parentheses correspond to the pages of her book.

1857 A popular literary magazine, *The Knickerbocker*, even published a short fictional story called "The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman," which offered a sympathetic portrait of a person with transgender feelings (46).

1864–1865 Karl Heinrich Ulrichs anonymously published, in Austria, a series of booklets under the collective title *Researches on the Riddle of "Man-Manly" Love*; in them he developed a biological theory to account for people such as himself, whom he called "Urnings," and whom he described with the Latin phrase *anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa* (meaning "a female soul enclosed within a male body"). It was in correspondence with Ulrichs that the German-born Hungarian citizen Karl Maria Kertbeny first coined the term homosexual in 1869 (54).

1894 Birth of Claude Cahun.

1895 According to Lind, a group of New York androgynes led by one Roland Reeves formed "a little club" called the *Cercle Hermaphrodites* on the basis of their self-perceived need "to unite for defense against the world's bitter persecution" (57).

1909 Magnus Hirschfeld's writes *The Transvestites*, "Case 13" which consists of letters, written by a person known variously as Jenny, Johanna, and John, who was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and who later moved to the United States.

1913-1919 Cahun's first writings.

1913 British psychologist Havelock Ellis coined "sexo-aesthetic inversion" (wanting to look like the other sex) and later, in 1928, "Eonism," which referred to the Chevalier D'Eon (also mentioned by Sandy Stone), a member of the court of Louis XVI who, at various stages of life, lived alternately as a man and as a woman (55).

1918-1922 Earl Lind, a self-described “androgynous” and “fairy” in New York who also used the names Ralph Werther and Jennie June, and who voluntarily underwent castration, published two autobiographical works, *Autobiography of an Androgyne* (1918) and *The Female Impersonators* (1922) (57).

1925-29 Photographic works of Claude Cahun.

1930 Publication of *Aveux non Avenus*.

1933 Nazis burn the library of Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin.

1942 Louise Lawrence, a native, trans-fem native of northern California who had been dressing in feminine attire most of her life, had developed an extensive correspondence network with trans people around the country by placing personal ads in magazines and by contacting people whose arrests for public cross-dressing had been covered in the newspapers (61).

1944 The trans woman Ovida Delect, pretended she was a member of the National Popular Youth (a branch of the National Popular Rally) presenting herself as a supporter of collaboration with the Germans in order to steal important files and create major disturbances in the ranks of this organization by disseminating fake news items and false information.

1950s Only a few dozen “sex change” operations were performed in the United States, due to California governor Edmund G. (Pat) Brown’s opinion (supported by Karl Bowman and Alfred Kinsey) that transsexual genital modification would constitute “mayhem” (the willful destruction of healthy tissue) and who threatened to expose any surgeon who performed such an operation to possible criminal prosecution.

1953 Christine Jorgensen’s successful M2F surgery was the most written-about topic in the media.

1954 Death of Claude Cahun.

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Περίληψη

Αναδιαπραγματευόμενα την Τρανς* “Υπαρξη μέσα από τη Σουρεαλιστική Τέχνη του Claude Cahun

Αυτή η πτυχιακή είναι μια αποαποικιοκρατική, μεταφεμινιστική προσέγγιση στη σουρεαλιστική αυτοβιογραφία *Aveux Non Avenus* (1930) του Claude Cahun και των δύο αυτοπορτρέτων του, που χρονολογούνται το 1927 και το 1928 αντίστοιχα. Λόγω της ενασχόλησής του με τις θεματικές του queerness, της παραγωγής ταυτότητας και της “παράστασης,” το έργο του Cahun έχει απασχολήσει αρκετά διανοητ@, ακόμη και έναν αιώνα μετά την δημοσίευσή του. Η ακαδημαϊκή έρευνα έχει εδρεώσει τη παρουσία του κουιρ καλλιτέχνη και έχει ξεδιπλώσει την τεράστια συνεισφορά του στο Σουρεαλισμό, παρά την ανοιχτά ομοφοβική ατζέντα του κινήματος. Η κατηγοριοποίηση του Cahun ως “Γυναίκα στο Σουρεαλισμό” και ο αυθαίρετος προσδιορισμός του ως λεσβία, καθιστά όμως ένα νέο είδος βίας, πάνω σε έναν καλλιτέχνη που έχει δηλώσει ξεκάθαρα: Αρρενωπότητα; Θηλυκότητα; Εξαρτάται από τη συνθήκη. Το ουδέτερο είναι το μόνο γένος που μου ταιριάζει πάντα. (Cahun 232). Οι πολλαπλές αναφορές του Cahun στη Δυσφορία Φύλου, τόσο στις φωτογραφίες όσο και στα γραπτά του, καθώς και η αμφίβουλα έμφυλη (και άφυλη) γλώσσα που χρησιμοποιεί στην αυτοβιογραφία του, αποτελούν απόδειξη για την τρανς ύπαρξη και ταυτόχρονα την απουσία της από το αρχείο της Ιστορίας και της Λογοτεχνίας. Αυτή η ανάλυση αντιστέκεται, λοιπόν, συνειδητά στην (επανα)τοποθέτηση της Δυτικής επιστημολογίας πάνω σε αυτές της λογοτεχνικές μορφές που δημιουργούν μια δική τους γλώσσα και αντι-επιστημολογία, και έτσι, η ενεργοποίηση των θεωρητικών μεθόδων είναι μόνο συμπληρωματική των Σουρεαλιστικών και Dada τεχνικών του Cahun. Επειδή οι Σουρεαλιστές ήταν επηρεασμένοι από τις θεωρίες του Φρόιντ και του Λακάν, έχει νόημα να εξετάσουμε το πώς ο καλλιτέχνης επανοικιοποιείται τις (τρανσφοβικές) πρακτικές της ψυχανάλυσης. Το τρανς άτομο, δραματοποιεί ξανά (μπροστά στον καθρέφτη) την προσπάθεια για ταυτοποίηση, μια διαδικασία που πάντα αποτυγχάνει κατά το Mirror-Stage του Λακάν. Μη μπορώντας να αποκτήσει την ταυτότητά του, επιστρέφει σ’ αυτό το στάδιο, μόνο και μόνο για να επιβεβαιώσει ότι η ταυτότητα—η ύπαρξη για τον Σάρτ—δεν μπορεί να είναι ποτέ προσβάσιμη. Η ύπαρξη δεν μπορεί να παραχθεί ποτέ μέσα (ή από) το συνειδητό.

Αντίστοιχα, η λεγόμενη “ταυτότητα φύλου” δε θα μπορέσει ποτέ να αποκτηθεί μέσα από μια (συνειδητή) επανάληψη έμφυλων ενεργειών. Ο Cahun λοιπόν που συνειδητοποιεί ότι η *επιτέλεση* (και όχι η επιτελεστικότητα της Μπάτλερ) είναι το μόνο που υπάρχει, τη μετατρέπει σε στρατηγική για την αποαποικιοποίηση της ύπαρξής του: Η *Ναρκισσιστική επιτέλεση* αμφισβητεί, μέσω της παρωδίας, την σταθερότητα του Θεού και τη “διατήρηση” του φύλου, που προσιδιάζει σε θρησκευτική απολυταρχία. Η *προσθετική επιτέλεση* αμφισβητεί την φυσικότητα των “βιολογικών” οργάνων και τα αντικαθιστά με προσθετικά όργανα (μάσκες και μακιγιάζ) τα οποία γίνονται πλέον η μόνη αλήθεια όσων αφορά την επιτέλεση/έκφραση της ταυτότητας: “Κάτω από αυτή τη μάσκα μια άλλη μάσκα. Δεν θα σταματήσω ποτέ να αφαιρώ πρόσωπα.” Υποστηρίζω, λοιπόν, ότι οι “Χαμένες Εξομολογήσεις” (μαζί με τα σουρεαλιστικά φωτομοντάζ) καθώς και τα αυτοπορträίτα του Cahun προτείνουν τρόπους να υπάρξει κανείς διαφορετικά (τρόπους που το τρίτο ρεύμα φεμινισμού δε μπόρεσε να συλλάβει και να προτείνει) και που απαιτούν μια αποφασιστική στροφή από την έμφυλη γλώσσα και την επιστημολογία του φύλου. Μια τέτοια στροφή θα επιτρέψει τη ριζοσπαστική αναθεώρηση της τρανς ύπαρξης στο Σουρεαλισμό, το μοντερνισμό και το λογοτεχνικό αρχείο γενικότερα (ξεκινώντας με τον Claude Cahun). Ταυτόχρονα θα επιτρέψει μια αναθεώρηση (και σταδιακή εξάλειψη) των περιοριστικών κατηγοριών, όπως το “βιολογικό” φύλο, το φύλο, και η έκφραση φύλου, υποδεικνύοντας ένα είδος λόγου που επικυρώνει την *επιτέλεση* ως το μόνο (υφιστάμενο) στοιχείο του σώματος.