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## **Dark matters: recasting darkness with contemporary Latin American Art**

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### HIGH WAVE 3

#### Darkness in the Collagraphs by Belkis Ayón *Safeguarding Knowledges*



**Figure 6.1** Belkis Ayón, *Aunque vayamos al cielo siempre se acordarán de nosotros* (Even If We Go to Heaven, They Will Always Remember Us), 1990, Collagraphy, 100 x 68.5 cm

It was in the summer of 2018 that I first saw the print *Aunque vayamos al cielo siempre se acordarán de nosotros* [Even If We Go to Heaven, They Will Always Remember Us] (1990) by Cuban artist Belkis Ayón (figure 6.1).<sup>359</sup> The largely black image of an empty-faced woman riding a goat hung in the middle of the artist's sister's house in Havana—where it ended up soon after the artist's premature death in 1999—alongside a dozen other equally dark works with similar figures.<sup>360</sup> For some reason I still cannot

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<sup>359</sup> Some of the ideas presented in this chapter were articulated in the essay “Darkness as Actor in the Prints by Belkis Ayón”, published in: Helen Westgeest and Kitty Zijlmans (eds.), *Mix and Stir. New Outlooks on Contemporary Art from Global Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), pp. 37-43. I presented this research in a preliminary stage at the Afro-Latin American Research Institute at Harvard University: Stéphanie Noach, “La oscuridad como actor en los grabados de Belkis Ayón”, Afro-Latin American Research Center at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University, 12 February 2021.

<sup>360</sup> In 2003, four years after Belkis Ayón's demise, her sister, Katia Ayón, created the Belkis Ayón Estate. The estate was responsible for the preservation and promotion of the artist's work and was located at her personal house in Havana. Katia Ayón passed away in 2019. Since that year, her widower, Ernesto Leyva, has taken over these responsibilities. In addition, the curator and art historian Cristina Vives has actively promoted Belkis Ayón's work through a recurrent solo exhibition titled *Nkame, a Retrospective of Cuba Printmaker Belkis Ayón*. Between 2017 and 2020, *Nkame* traveled to different venues in the United States, including the Fowler Museum in Los

explain, I was immediately drawn to it. It may have been because of its central location in the living room, or maybe it was something in the image itself that caught my attention. What I do know positively is that as I got closer to it, I became convinced that I was looking at a forthright representation: I had no doubt that the peculiar looking woman—with her large bare eyes, her naked body covered with fish scales and adorned with religious symbols—and the accompanying goat and serpent represented some aspect of reality. This conviction was short-lived. When turning my eye to the space around and inside the clearly delineated forms, I was overcome by darkness. From that moment onwards, there was no holding back anymore: the dark started to get to me from everywhere, swallowing up all figurative elements. Whatever I had believed about this scene no longer existed. Two thoughts imposed themselves on me: the image, which just a moment ago seemed to reveal all to me, turned out to present something ungraspable; and, related, it took me from a sense of (seemingly) total understanding to one of absolute, yet enjoyable confusion.

In this chapter, I will advance towards the proposition that only when considering *Aunque vayamos*'s darkness, equivalent to its penetrating black ink, we can come to an understanding of it, although this term might sound paradoxical here. For, what I will argue is that comprehending this image means to be attentive to what it wants from us: that we give up on understanding. Or at least a certain kind of understanding that, as the Martinican literary scholar and poet Édouard Glissant considers, aims at clarification, and, hence, at objectification and appropriation. A kind of understanding which he associates with the colonizer when faced with peoples and cultures that are unknown to him. Glissant's reflections on understanding as an illuminating and objectifying exercise are vital to this chapter, and so is his conceptualization of opacity. By this he means the force of people and things alike to remain unknown and thereby, to not be dominated. Drawing from this concept of opacity—which as the author writes “is not the dark, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such”—I will examine what the black ink of Ayón's image is capable of doing and provoking.<sup>361</sup> I am aware that it may appear naïve, absurd even, to suggest that this black ink, what I will also allude to as dark matter, has the capacity to do things, that it has agency, just as much as I am aware that my previous suggestion about the desire of the image might seem so. Yet, such are exactly the premises underlying this chapter. I am far from the first to articulate any of these premises.

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Angeles, Museo del Barrio in New York, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Station Museum in Texas, Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona, and the Chicago Cultural Center. Cristina Vives was also the curator of Ayón's first retrospective solo-exhibition in Europe, at the Reina Sofia, *Belkis Ayón. Collographs* (17 November 2021- 18 April 2022). Ayón's work was exhibited at other mayor institutions in the last years, among them the 10<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennial, *We Don't Need Another Hero* (6 June-6 September 2018), the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial, *The Milk of Dreams* (23 April-27 November 27 2022), as well as in the solo-exhibition *Belkis Ayón. Ya estamos aquí.* at the Ludwig Foudnation in Aachen (21 October 2022-26 February 2023). For more information about the Belkis Ayón estate, visit: “Belkis Ayón Estate“, Accessed July 2021, <http://www.ayonbelkis.cult.cu/en/belkis-ayon-estate/>, and see the documentary “Belkis Ayón. Regreso a casa|Back Home,” Havana, published February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, YouTube video, 29:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjCjuCcq71g>

<sup>361</sup> “L'opaque n'est pas l'obscur, mais il peut l'être et être accepté comme tel”. Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 205

For the former, I draw from the insights by philosopher Bruno Latour regarding the concept “actant”, as well as from the very related scholarship by Jane Bennett concerning the life of non-organic matter. Both agree on something foundational: agency is not just limited to humans, but applies to nonhumans and “not quite human things” too.<sup>362</sup> In their thinking, rivers have the capacity to take action, and so do, as I wrote before, the earth, stem cells, fish oils and electricity.<sup>363</sup> They should all be considered “actants”, Latour (and Bennett after him) suggest: beings with wills and goals, that through their performances alter the order of things. Their exceeding common contrast between, on the one hand, animate subjects, and on the other, inanimate subjects is also what distinguishes them from actors, a term, indeed, often limited to humans.<sup>364</sup> A sister-concept of agency that appears repeatedly throughout Bennett’s writing—and which I find more accurate for my purposes in this dissertation—is vitality. As I mentioned in the chapter about *Volátil*, it refers to “the capacity of things not only to impede or block the wills and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own”.<sup>365</sup> Latour’s and Bennett’s attempts to articulate the life of non-organic matter are vital to my understanding of the black ink in Ayón’s images. I, too, will examine what darkness can do. I, too, will examine the agency and effectivity of this matter.

With regard to the suggestion that *Aunque vayamos* desires, I am indebted to the previously mentioned art historian W.J.T. Mitchell, who was the first in the field of art history to recognize that images, like people, have desires and wishes of their own.<sup>366</sup> This is key to my analysis of Ayón’s work because it allows me to establish a genuine relationship with it, in which I—like in any relationship—should be sensitive to what it wants, and especially, what it wants from me. It is key because it stimulates me to approach *Aunque vayamos* not with the illusion that it is a passive image compliantly waiting to be interpreted or revealed, but rather with the awareness that it is just as complex as any other living thing. I agree with Mitchell that “what pictures want is not the same as the message they communicate or the effect they produce; it’s not even the same as what they say they want”, yet would like to add that what an image does not disclose, its potential refusal to communicate any message at all, possibly says more than what can be perceived.<sup>367</sup> Furthermore, what it communicates to us can be at odds with what we as art historians have traditionally striven for, namely to truly “grasp” and “reconnoiter” an object “in its every aspect”, and make place for an approach based on respect.<sup>368</sup> Respect is a term which lies

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<sup>362</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. ix

<sup>363</sup> See, for example, Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 45, no.1, (2014): pp. 1-18

<sup>364</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, pp. 49-63 and Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 303

<sup>365</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. iix

<sup>366</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005)

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

<sup>368</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 3

at the heart of literary scholar Doris Sommer's analysis of texts by Afro-American and Latin American authors. Defying "presumptuous habits of reading" that aspire after comprehension and mastery, Sommer examines what it means to be guided by respect when engaging with texts by minority authors.<sup>369</sup> Especially in those instances when they ask of us to step back, when they tell us not to proceed. In this chapter, Sommer's ideas about texts that refuse intimacy will resonate profoundly. Like her, I will not be driven by the pursuit of comprehensive knowledge of Ayón's image, but rather by my respect for it.

### **Belkis Ayón: A Dark Oeuvre**

Darkness figures prominently in all of the prints Ayón made between 1990 till her early demise in 1999.<sup>370</sup> While in her very first works in the early 1980s, Ayón already worked with black ink, it became as central as it is in *Aunque vayamos* in the last ten years of her career.<sup>371</sup> That is to say that the turn of the decade coincided with a turn in the artist's color palette: the greens, pinks, reds, and yellows were by 1990 completely substituted by diverse shades of black.<sup>372</sup> Darkness was by far not the only element that kept on coming back in Ayón's prints. Recurrence lies at the heart of her oeuvre that is particularly set in a specific printing technique called collagraphy, which will later be discussed in more detail. Furthermore, in all of her prints, we see the same female figure staring at us from a condition of total nakedness. Just like in *Aunque vayamos*, she is bare in every sense possible: in addition to being unclothed, her face lacks most distinguishing features. It is deprived of a nose, mouth, and ears. Only

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<sup>369</sup> Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution. When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 15; Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. x

<sup>370</sup> Belkis Ayón died in 1999, at the age of 32. In spite of having lost her so prematurely, we inherited an impressively large oeuvre of more or less hundred prints. This is mainly because her work professionalized extremely early. She already had a professional career while studying at the Higher Institute of Art of Havana (ISA) from 1986 to 1991. Well before obtaining her bachelor's degree in engraving (in 1991), she participated in exhibitions such as the VII and VIII San Juan Biennials of Latin American and Caribbean Engraving (1986 and 1988)

<sup>371</sup> Most authors writing about Ayón's work mention that there is a moment in her career in which she started to focus exclusively on black, grey, and white. There is no consensus, however, in what year this happened. According to art historian Eugenio Valdés it happened between 1990 and 1991: Eugenio Valdés, in *Belkis Ayón. Arte cubano contemporáneo*, eds. Shirley Moreíra Vázquez and Patricia Martínez Chiroles (Sevilla: Arte Cubano Ediciones, 2016), p. 8. Art historian Cristina Vives designated 1991, the year of Ayón's graduation from the University of the Arts of Cuba (ISA), as the year in which she abandoned the use of color: Cristina Vives, "Belkis Ayón: Bibliographical Data," in *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*, ed. Alex Fleites (Madrid: Turner, 2010), p. 297

<sup>372</sup> We could detect three exceptions, three prints in which other colors do appear: one print which she made together with her colleague Ángel Ramírez (*Dando y Dando*, 1997); another one which was only the second edition of previous black and white print (*Mokongo*, 1991); and one print which she made during a workshop at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia in the same year of her demise, 1999. In the catalogue raisonné, *Nkame*, also a black, white, and gold serigraphy is included which she made in 1994. I do not count them under her artworks because it was not perceived as such by the artist: it functioned as a New Year postcard. In either case, it is worthwhile to say that she renounced every color except for black because these three prints (of which one a collaboration, the other a second version of a previously all-black-and-grey work, and another one part of workshop) pale into insignificance compared with the dozens of largely black prints made in the last decade of her career. Ayón's works in multiple colors, both before and after 1990, are much less well-known, and certainly also less representative of her oeuvre.



**Figure 6.2** Belkis Ayón, *La Cena* (The Supper), 1990, Collagraphy, 138 x 300 cm

her eyes appear, but these are equally subject to absence. They have no lids, lashes, or tear ducts. The goat and the serpent nearly always accompany her, and all of them include the fish scales we have seen before in the protagonist's body. Oftentimes, religious symbols such as halos and crosses are evoked. However, what is most important for the purpose of this chapter is that the vitality of darkness, as becomes apparent in *Aunque vayamos*, is recurrent too. The reason why I concentrate on *Aunque vayamos* is because darkness here is as predominant, as dominant, as to not allow to be disturbed by the plethora of human figures, animals, plants, symbols, and signs that appear in some of her prints. In other well-known works by the artist, such as *La cena* (The Supper, 1991; figure 6.2), *La consagración III* (The Consecration III, 1991; figure 6.3), *Nlloro* (Weeping, 1991; figure 6.4), *Resurrección* (Resurrection, 1998; figure 6.5) or *Perfidia* (Treachery, 1998; figure 6.6), the vitality of darkness is similar, but it is more likely to be overshadowed by the abundant figurative elements.



**Figure 6.3** *La consagración III* (The Consecration III), 1991, Collagraphy, fig. 3), 207 x 303 cm



**Figure 6.4** Belkis Ayón, *Nlloro* (Weeping), 1991, Collagraphy, 1215 x 300 cm

Although many of the authors who researched Ayón's work—such as Cristina Vives, Eugenio Valdés, Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, David Mateo, and Orlando Hernández—remarked that after the year 1990 her prints were predominantly composed of black ink, neither of them has addressed this matter in greater depth.<sup>373</sup> Their eyes were fixed on the representational elements; on the sharply displayed and evidently outlined animal and human figures. As if absorbed in them, they unequivocally arrived at the same diagnosis: Ayón's prints offer the hitherto inexistent iconography of the creation myth of the Afro-Cuban brotherhood Abakuá.<sup>374</sup> This renowned society of occult knowledge and mutual help was established in Havana in 1836 by enslaved men transported from the Old Calabar (what is currently Southeast Nigeria). Resistance defined these men: they organized themselves precisely to fight against slavery.<sup>375</sup> Their rebellion against colonial rule from their own urban communities gave them their sobriquet *cimarrones urbanos*, which translates as urban maroons.<sup>376</sup>

Studies such as the ones by cultural historian Ivor Miller and historian Alejandro de la Fuente show that Abakuá, as well as other Afro-Cuban religions, have suffered from discrimination and marginalization since the very beginning, and that keeping outsiders at distance was the only manner for them to safeguard their identity. During colonial times, they were persecuted as disobedient elements, conspiring against Spanish rule.<sup>377</sup> In the 1850s, these persecutions went as far as to nearly provoke the demise of the brotherhood: the Guardia Civil (the Spanish military police) arrested black men engaged in any kind of gathering and exiled them to Spanish prisons on several African coasts.<sup>378</sup> Persecutions did not stop when Cuba became a republic in 1902, as black men continued falling victim to violence and many Abakuá sacred objects were confiscated by the police, and also after the outbreak of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 their situation continued being lamentable.<sup>379</sup> Although Fidel Castro uttered more than once that his goal was to eliminate any form of (racial) discrimination, the revolutionary government regarded religions of African origin with a certain disdain. Or, to be more precise, these religions were scorned as “obstacles to the construction of socialism.”<sup>380</sup> While they were

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<sup>373</sup> Shirley Moreíra Vázquez and Patricia Martínez Chiroles (eds), *Belkis Ayón. Arte cubano contemporáneo* (Sevilla: Arte Cubano Ediciones, 2016); Alex Fleites (ed), *Nkamé Belkis Ayón* (Madrid: Turner, 2010); Orlando Hernández, *Without Masks. Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art* (London, 2010).

<sup>373</sup> Generally, those authors who write about Ayón's prints mention that most of them include tones of black, grey and white. However, they do not take further notice of their darkness and abstain from awarding it any position in their analysis.

<sup>374</sup> Art historian Eugenio Valdés observed that Ayón “was constructing an iconography that did not count with representations” (Eugenio Valdés, *Nkamé*, p. 289); Cristina Vives, along the very same lines, articulated that with her collagraphs Ayón “began to grant the Abakuá legend an impressive iconography” (Cristina Vives in *Nkamé*, p.297); and David Mateo expressed that “she was capable of imagining certain points of formal and aesthetic balance and on them she erected the premises of her iconography” (David Mateo, *Nkamé*, p.267)

<sup>375</sup> Ivor L. Miller, “A Secret Society Goes Public: The Relationship Between Abakuá and Cuban Popular Culture” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 43, no. 1 (2000): p. 161

<sup>376</sup> Ivor Miller referred to Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux who was the first to refer to the Abakuá with this name. Ivor L. Miller, “La Sociedad secreta Abakuá,” in *Legado de culturas africanas en el nuevo mundo*, ed. Narciso J. Hidalgo (Medellin: Ediciones Unaula, 2020), p. 51

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

<sup>380</sup> Alejandro de La Fuente, *A Nation for All*, p. 290



**Figure 6.5** Belkis Ayón, *Resurrección* (Resurrection), 1998, Collagraphy, 263 x 212 cm



**Figure 6.6** Belkis Ayón, *Perfidia* (Treachery), 1998, Collagraphy, 208 x 252 cm

not systematically repressed, as de la Fuente emphasizes, during the mid-1960s the government did try to limit their growth, imposed limitations on its ceremonies, and associated them with crimes and counterrevolutionary behaviors.<sup>381</sup>

Interviews with the artist, as well as her personal notes, confirm that the myth of the brotherhood—and especially the sacrifice of its principal female figure—is central to her graphic works.<sup>382</sup> From them we learn that she had first heard about it in 1984, while a student at the San Alejandro Academy.<sup>383</sup> It had impressed her to such a degree as to voraciously examine all the studies she could find about the myth, including most importantly *El monte* (The Bush, 1954) by Lydia Cabrera. Till today, this book is considered one of the foundational works on Afro-Cuban culture and religion, and particularly on Abakuá. Ayón also read other anthropological studies, by prominent researchers such as Fernando Ortiz, and Enrique Sosa Rodríguez, as well as internal Abakuá files seized by the police, and historical studies about the discrimination its members had suffered.<sup>384</sup> Thanks to her research, Ayón learned that, even though many different and at times contradictory versions of the myth exist, they mostly boil down to the following:<sup>385</sup>

One morning, Sikán, princess of the Efor nation, went to fetch water from Oddán, the sacred river that separated her peoples from the Efik nation. Without her noticing, a fish swam into her gourd. This was not a regular fish, it was Tanzé, the incarnation of the almighty god Abasí. On her way home, Sikán suddenly heard a deep roar coming out of the gourd she was carrying on her head. It was the voice of the almighty god who divulged her the great secret. She was the first to hear it and she should remain the only one: Sikán was prohibited to pass it on to anybody else. What happened next is one of the many points in which the different versions contradict each other. Most often, Sikán is presented as a betrayer. Supposedly, she was so afraid and shocked after hearing the secret that she shared the story with her father, the king. He was well-aware of the risk his daughter ran, knowing about the secret. Well-aware he was too that the neighboring nations would do anything in their power to steal the peace and prosperity bringing Tanzé. To prevent this from happening, he locked his daughter up in the forest, and also he told her to keep silent. However, so the story most often goes, Sikán told the secret again, now

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid., p. 292

<sup>382</sup> For interviews with the artist, see: Jaime Sarusky, “Hablar de los mitos y el arte,” *Revolución y Cultura* 2 (1999); David Mateo, “En confidencia irregular,” *La gaceta de Cuba* 2 (1997): pp. 50-51. Some of Ayón’s notes are reproduced in the catalogue raisonné *Nkame Belkis Ayón*

<sup>383</sup> Cristina Vives, *Belkis Ayón. Biographical Data*, in “Nkamé Belkis Ayón”, p. 297

<sup>384</sup> See, among others, Ana Belén Martín-Sevillano, “Criscrossing Gender, Ethncitiy, and Race”, *Cuban Studies* 42 (2011): p. 140; David Mateo, *Printmaking as a Resource and Resolve*, in “Nkamé Belkis Ayón”, p. 267; Eugenio Valdés, *The Holy Sacrament as a Constant*, in “Nkamé Belkis Ayón”, p.287

<sup>385</sup> This abbreviated version of the Abakuá foundation myth is based upon some of the most profound studies on the Abakuá society: Lydia Cabrera, *La sociedad secreta Abakuá: narrada por viejos adeptos*, (Ediciones Universal: Miami, 2005); Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1999); Lydia Cabrera, *La lengua sagrada de los ñañigos*, (Ediciones Universal: Miami, 1988); Enrique Sosa Cabrera, *Los Ñañigos*, Ediciones Casa de las Americas, Havana, 1982, and the more recent revision of the myth by Patricia González Gómez-Cásseres, “Sikanékue, mujer Fundacional en Abakuá,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 35, no. 2 (2016)

to her husband, an Efik prince. To punish Sikán for her betrayal, her life was sacrificed (in most versions by her father) and her dismembered body was hung from the sacred palm tree.

Yet other versions exist, in which Sikán rather than a betrayer, is portrayed as an independent woman, firm in her principles. In these versions, she is the type of woman the men of her tribe, as well as of competing tribes, were afraid of, the type of woman that formed a threat to their own position: being elected as the first person to know the secret made her more important than anybody else, including her male companions. In a recent article, ‘Sikanékue, mujer fundacional en Abakuá’ (2016), by Latin Americanist Patricia González Gómez-Cásseres, Sikán speaks back. The author lets her recount the myth in the first person, as if Sikán were telling it herself. In that way we read that the princess did not actually pass on the secret. Instead, her betrayal was made up by some powerful men to prevent a war from breaking out. The tribe of her father and the one of her future husband, she writes, agreed to punish Sikán for knowing the secret. The princess tells us about other stories that have been told, all of them agreeing on the fact that she was, more than anything, a woman who possessed “an occult and mysterious feminine power that had to be repressed.”<sup>386</sup>

After Sikán was sacrificed, most versions tell us, her flesh and blood were consumed by the first members of the Abakuá society, also pejoratively called the *ñañigos*. To retrieve the sacred voice of Tanzé, the fortune-teller of the Efor, Nasako, performed all kinds of magic rituals. None of them worked. After Tanzé died, Nasako tried again by adding Tanzé’s scales to a drum he built from the wood of a palm tree at the Oddán. Still his voice was too weak and the skins of other animals—such as snakes, deer, and crocodiles—and the skin and eyes of Sikán were added. Again, they could not fully resuscitate Tanzé’s voice, and only when a goat’s (Mbori) skin was added, the miracle occurred.

### From Figures to Matters

I am confident that knowing about Abakuá’s creation myth can be advantageous when analyzing Ayón’s work. It makes us see that the woman with the vacant face, as well as the goat and the snakes, are not just arbitrary figures: they play fundamental roles in the Afro-Cuban myth. Furthermore, I consider it valuable how the insight into the life and sacrifice of Sikán has opened the door to meaningful feminist readings such as the ones by Gómez-Cásseres and literary scholar Flora González Mandri. They examine how the bare-faced female figure inhabiting Ayón’s prints could be regarded as both a formal and symbolic merging between the artist’s own body, a black woman in contemporary Cuba, and Sikán, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century princess from the African Ekpe Societies of the Cross River region.<sup>387</sup> However, I do wish to go beyond the broadly shared assumption that Ayón’s prints are iconographic. Designating them as such implies to create the illusion that they are a visual translation of the Abakuá myth. That they are,

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<sup>386</sup> Gómez-Cásseres, “Sikanékue, mujer fundacional en Abakuá,” p. 12

<sup>387</sup> Literary scholar Flora González Mandri developed an interesting analysis about how Ayón’s collagraphs refer, simultaneously, to an African past and to the position of black women in contemporary Cuba. See: Flora González Mandri, *Guarding Cultural Memory. Afro-Cuban Women in Literature and the Arts* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2006). Patricia González Gómez-Cásseres raises similar issues in her beforementioned article.

to quote Georges Didi-Huberman, nothing more than “accurate mirrors” or “transparent windows” on the myth.<sup>388</sup> Designating Ayón’s oeuvre as iconographic also creates the illusion that we can decipher it; that we can acquire exhaustive knowledge of the black prints if only we study the stories surrounding the brotherhood in depth, and subsequently, rightly apply the iconographic tools.

Reminding my own sense of confusion when facing *Aunque vayamos*, as well as recalling that other researchers on Ayón’s work have systematically written about how they fail to make total sense of it, I can imagine we feel attracted by this promise of knowledge.<sup>389</sup> That is, I am conscious of how iconography plays with our desire to—to say this in Didi-Huberman’s words again—“represent to ourselves in a more intelligible way what the image before us still seemed to hide within it”; to—to say this in my own words—clarify all that is ambivalent and obscure about Ayón’s images.<sup>390</sup> I am conscious too of the appeal of other manners and methods that could possibly allow us to look “behind the veil” of Ayón’s work.<sup>391</sup> The author that has most categorically articulated how we could do so is Orlando Hernández. He suggests that we resort to the people highest up in the hierarchy of the secret society—to Abakuá’s principal priests and kings—because only then we can discover the true content of Ayón’s work.<sup>392</sup>

If we want to gain insight into *Aunque vayamos*, we should not let ourselves be seduced by iconography or by any other method or means promising full disclosure. In fact, I want to take this one step further by suggesting that neither should we let ourselves be seduced by the representational elements which led us to the diagnosis of Ayón’s work as iconographic in the first place. Inspired by Didi-Huberman’s reading of the pigmentary white background as the focal point of Fra Angelico’s fresco *The Annunciation* (1440-41; figure 6.7) and not the interaction between the angel Gabriel and virgin Mary, I propose to look at *Aunque vayamos* again. Like Didi-Huberman, I want to now turn a

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<sup>388</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 3

<sup>389</sup> I dare to say that everyone who has written about Ayón’s images, has lingered on the impression that her work contains moments, or parts, which are completely intelligible and others which preclude all comprehension. Even though they have used different words to express this, mystery is the most recurrent one. The art historian Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, for example, articulated that “only deep mystery surrounds and fills them” and critic and curator Orlando Hernández observes that Ayón’s art “preserves the old mysteries from Africa” and adds to them new ones “typical of a black Cuban woman of the end of the end of the twentieth century” (Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, in *Queloides: race and racism in Cuban contemporary art*, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente, Pittsburgh: Mattress Factory, 2010. Orlando Hernández, *Without Masks. Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art* (London: Watch Hill Charitable Foundation, 2010, p.19) Ayón’s prints are “so open” yet “so closed” art historian Dennys Montes de Oca wrote (Dannys Montes de Oca, *Transcendent Belkis Ayón*, in *Queloides*, 94.) and art historian and curator of the Nkame exhibition Cristina Vives underlines their enigmatic and mystical character (Cristina Vives, *Belkis Ayón. Behind the Veil of a Myth*, (Houston: Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018), p. 28

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1

<sup>391</sup> The title of the recently published book about Belkis Ayón, Cristina Vives (ed.), *Belkis Ayón. Behind the Veil of a Myth* (Houston: Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018)) carries the words “behind the veil” and reveals, yet again, this desire to fully disclose the meaning and content of Ayón’s work.

<sup>392</sup> See the full fragment here: “there is still much research to be done to discover the contents and purposes of Belkis Ayón’s work, and this will be possible using the tools of art criticism and ethnography, as well as by getting the perspectives of the practicing members of the Abakuá Society. Approaching her work seems to require readings from the true specialists, the plazas, obones or indiabones who, being the highest religious hierarchy within this institution, have accrued the most knowledge and are therefore authorized to say what Belkis’s artistic language expressed.” In: Orlando Hernández, *Without Masks*, p. 19

blind eye to “everything that we thought we saw because we knew what to call it, and return henceforth to what our knowledge had not been able to clarify”.<sup>393</sup> Curiously enough, to return to those parts that I did not know what to make of, the parts that had seemed obscure to me from early on, is to return to *Aunque vayamos*’s darkness, yet with fresh eyes. Eyes that are more sensitive to the darkness: seeing, for example, that it has a certain texture, abounds in relief, and is more translucent in some parts than in others. What we see in *Aunque vayamos*, and is likewise suggestive of all her other images, is that the darkness, at some points, raises above the surface while at other points it remains stuck to it. Sometimes, we have the impression we can see through it, and sometimes our vision is blocked. Facing the print, we comprehend that the darkness can be smooth, yet rough as well. Last, there are moments in which



**Figure 6.7** Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, 1440-41, Fresco, Florence, Monastery of San Marco, cell 3

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<sup>393</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 16

we are confronted with just plain darkness, while at other moments we notice how it is inscribed with abstract patterns.

The extreme richness with which darkness appears in Ayón's prints was consequential to the particular printing technique she worked with, collagraphy. The procedure was as follows: she collaged diverse materials such as cardboard, various kinds of paper, acrylic, gesso, chalk, sandpaper, and carborundum onto a cardboard matrix. Some of them did not receive any further treatment before being glued to the surface, while others were strongly intervened in. With scissors and knives, Ayón cut out meticulously designed patterns, suggesting, for example, the goat's leopard skin in *Aunque Vayamos* or the fish scales on Sikán's body in *La cena* and *Perfidia*. After finishing the matrix, she smeared a thick layer of black ink to it. Subsequently, she used a cloth to remove some of the ink and to fade it out in other parts. A white paper was then laid on top of the matrix and both were run through the press. The white paper that came out of it, which is thus the inverse of the matrix, constitutes the actual collagraph. This means nothing less than that the entire image emerged out of only black ink, that its genesis lies in only dark matter. The different forms, textures, patterns, and tones were the result of how the different materials on the matrix translated the ink. To say this differently, what the dark matter turned into depended on, among others, the workings of the gesso, chalk, and patterned papers. With regard to its colors: the parts of the matrix where there was nothing except for black, were black also after coming out of the press; the parts which absorbed part of the black became grey in the collagraph; the ones that were cut out and from which the ink was removed with the cloth remained white.<sup>394</sup> The black parts of the print were consequentially the richest and most heterogenous materially, containing diverse gradations, patterns and textures, while the white was, contrarily, flatter, duller. It showed the white paper as it was, as it had been before going through the press, without any intervention.

While *Aunque vayamos* with its 100 x 68.5 cm is modest in its size and is printed on one single sheet, many of Ayón's prints are breathtakingly large and spread out over multiple pieces of paper. Some of the prints I referred to earlier, contain life-sized, or even larger than life, figures and to accommodate them, they were awarded all the spaces they needed. *La cena*, for example, spreads out over six sheets, *Perfidia* over seven, *Resurrección* and *Nlloro* over nine, and *Consagración* consists of as much as twelve sheets. Most of the prints were rectangular, but not always the entire surface was used for composing the scenes. In quite some cases, parts of the paper(s) were left blank. They were not printed on and did not form part of the composition. Except for *La cena*, this was the case for all the larger-sized prints I referred to previously. The two upper rows of papers constituting *La consagración III*, for example, were only partly filled and the printed areas in them made up for circular forms.

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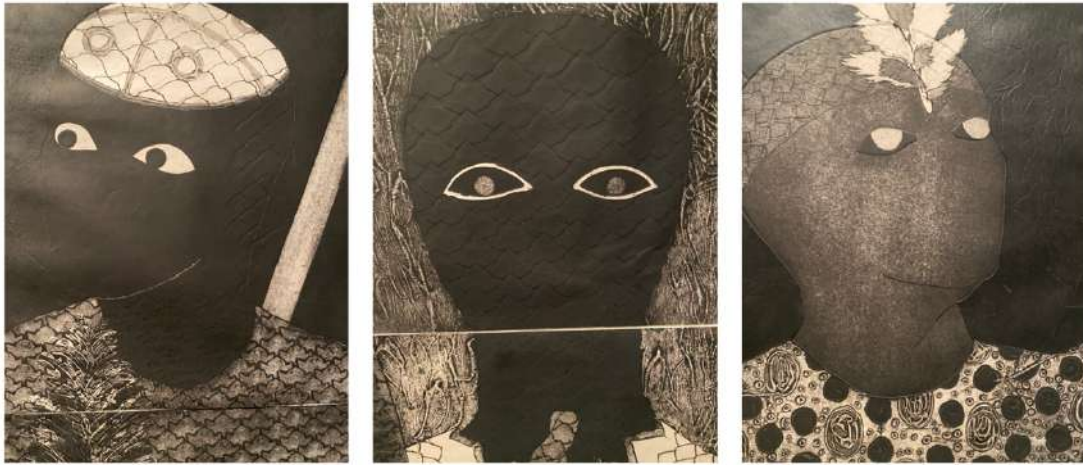
<sup>394</sup> In the video, "Belkis Ayón: A Documentary" we can see how Ayón executed her collagraphs: Yoland Skeete-Laessig, "Belkis Ayón: A Documentary" Havana, 1998, Vimeo video, 5:40, <https://vimeo.com/184385961>. For a description of Ayón's engagement with collagraphy, also see: Cristina Vives (ed.), *Belkis Ayón. Behind the Veil of a Myth* (Houston: Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 2018), p. 61; David Mateo, in *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*, p. 266; Eugenio Valdés, *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*, p. 286

Now that I have arrived at this particular collagraph, I want to take advantage of the opportunity to look a little deeper into the versatility and wealth of the dark matter and how it comes forth. This is not because they are greater in *La consagración III* than in Ayón's other prints but, on the contrary, because *La consagración III* is exemplary of all the other works in this respect. When zooming in on the black of the upper left part (figure 6.8), we can see that in just one paper it appears as plain, even, and opaque in (the pupils), rough, bumpy, and crisscrossed by grooves (the space in between the figures), and rather translucent and inscribed with shallow, serpentine, black lines that are even more translucent (the black circles on the body next to the white-faced figure). That the black is heterogenous in tone, translucence, texture, and density also becomes obvious when having a closer look at some of the many faces portrayed (figure 6.9). It is possible to distinguish faces composed of solid and massive black from faces that are more translucent and uneven, and faces with skins that are smooth from ones containing patterns and relief.



**Figure 6.8** Belkis Ayón, *La consagración III* (The Consecration III), 1991, Collagraphy, 207 x 303 cm (fragment)

Although the dark matter appears in diverse ways and takes on different shapes and forms, one thing remains constant: it is literally, materially, more overpowering than the lighter elements of the prints. In fact, the massiveness of the matter is proportional to its force. The denser, the thicker and the blacker the matter, that is, the more material the black, the more it stands out and the more robust it is in relation to those parts that are lighter. We can observe this, for example, when looking at the figure in the top right part of *La consagración III* (figure 6.10). The black is far more substantial than the spotted lighter face and, at least materially, dwarfs it. Typically, the greater the color contrast, the greater the material contrast too. The white is necessarily always the shallowest and the lowest element, devoid of any texture, relief, or volume, while the black reaches out and is extremely rich in all the things the white lacks.



**Figure 6.9** Belkis Ayón, *La consagración III* (The Consecration III), 1991, Collagraphy, 207 x 303 cm (fragment)



**Figure 6.10** Belkis Ayón, *La consagración III* (The Consecration III), 1991, Collagraphy, 207 x 303 cm (fragment)

I found all the more evidence for my view that Ayón's collagraphs originated from darkness, and that they existed only by virtue of the translation and absorption of this primordial matter, when visiting Ayón's exhaustive solo-exhibition at the Reina Sofia in Madrid.<sup>395</sup> Of course, because this enabled me to see such a huge part of her collagraphs, and of their matrixes and preliminary sketches too, but perhaps to an even greater extent because there was nothing that separated them from me. There was no glass plate or any other type of protection between most of the prints and me, and our relation was as direct and as intimate as could be. The result of their being so close to me, and so open too, was that my eyes could immediately land on them and travel their way through it. As was the case with regard to Peña's photographs, it was not only as if my eyes landed on the prints, it equally seemed as if my fingers did. Again, I saw the different forms, diverse textures, alterations in depth, and changes in density with both my eyes and my fingers. And again it was as if I could feel the accumulated mass of black ink, their patterns, rises and falls, and the lines running crisscross them, as well as the shallow and undefined whites. My fingers fell deep into the grooves, rose up high onto the bumps, and they travelled great distances across areas with an enormous diversity in terms of relief and density. Due to the profound material contrasts, it was not simply as if my fingers were gliding over the dark matter, maintaining some kind of control, but rather as if they were taken over by them. At moments, they seemed to be swallowed up, or sunken into them, and sometimes, if not careful enough, it was as if my fingers got cut or grazed. There were other, more pleasurable moments too, when it felt as if the matter was tickling or caressing me.

Surely, the level of intensity also depended on which copy I was travelling through. Each matrix generated diverse prints, sometimes just one or two, as was the case for respectively *La Consagración* and *Aunque vayamos*, but especially later in Ayón's career the number of copies became much larger. There were matrixes from which she made as many as 15 copies.<sup>396</sup> While not having been confronted with different copies from the same matrix, I can imagine that their hapticity, their intensity, alters according to their position in the sequence. It is likely that the grooves of the first prints are deeper, that its texture is more vigorous, than the last ones.

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<sup>395</sup> For more information about the exhibition, visit the museum's website: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/belkis-ayon>. For the occasion, a catalogue was also printed with high-quality images and critical texts by diverse authors who wrote about the oeuvre of the artist from different perspectives. Specialist in the study of Abakuá Ramón Torres Zayas, for example, focused on the relation between Ayón's work and the secret society, art historian Yissel Arce Padrón examined questions of race and gender in the artist's oeuvre, and art historian Rachel Weiss regarded Cuba's artistic environment of the 1980s. Yissel Arce Padrón, David Mateo Núñez, Ramón Torres Zayas, Cristina Vives, Rachel Weiss, *Belkis Ayón. Colografías* (Madrid: Reina Sofia, 2021)

<sup>396</sup> This counted, among others, for *Sin título [La soga y el fuego]* (1996); *Sin título [Mujer quitándose la ropa]* (1996); *Sin título [Torso blanco y mano Negra en el rostro]* (1996); *Sin título [Figura negra que carga a una blanca]* (1996)

## Black: Beyond Grasp

The realization that *Aunque vayamos*, and Ayón's prints more generally, are first and foremost composed of black ink, of dark matter, is so pervasive as to not leave us unaffected. Once we open to the darkness of the image, take cognizance of the fact that out of black ink all images were born, perceive the heterogeneity of its tone, texture, and relief, and accept how it nearly takes over everything, we are unable to continue regarding it as secondary to the clearly displayed and outlined forms and figures. And from reducing it light-heartedly to a means used to depict the background, the Abakuá symbols, or the animal and human figures, we begin to recognize it as an "essential and massive component" that deserves to be regarded and named afresh.<sup>397</sup> But how to take on such an endeavour? Again, it is Didi-Huberman who can provide some guidance. Reflecting upon the white of Fra Angelico's painting, he writes:

(...) it reaches us without our being able to grasp it, and [because] it envelops us without our being able, in our turn, to catch it in the snare of a definition. It is not visible in the sense of an object that is displayed or outlined; but neither is it invisible, for it strikes our eye, and even does much more than that. It is material.<sup>398</sup>

What Didi-Huberman writes about the white proves to be extremely useful in my consideration of the black in Ayón's image. So much so that everything he writes about the white of *The Annunciation* can be applied to the black of *Aunque vayamos*. Like him, I recognize that the black in Ayón's images takes action: it comes ever closer to us, reaches us, envelops us, and strikes our eye. Like him, I perceive that even though the black has the capacity to engage with us in these manners, it cannot be grasped.

The suggestion that the black cannot be grasped requires special attention because, so I argue, this is the core potential of this very matter in Ayón's collagraphs. Consequentially, only when invoking Bennett's ideas about the powers running through matter and emphasizing that darkness—invoked by the black—is a vitality that evades being captured, we can come closer to understanding of how to approach *Aunque vayamos*. It is Glissant who, through his reflections on opacity, can help us gain further insight into this issue. In one of his texts, "Traité du tout-monde" (1997), some of his fundamental ideas concerning this concept are crystallized:

I claim the right to *opacity* for everyone, which is not enclosure ... I do not need to 'understand' anyone, an individual, a community, a people, to 'take them with me' at the cost of stifling them, of losing them in an amorphous totality which I would manage, in order to be willing to live

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<sup>397</sup> Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

alongside them, to build with them, to take risks with them.<sup>399</sup>

Defying standardized negative conceptualizations, Glissant evokes opacity as an enabling value which affords anybody—and anybody is understood by him in the broadest sense possible, encompassing individuals, communities, and people, but also cultures, lands, and texts—the right to unknowability, to remain outside of the enclosure of comprehension. He wrote these words not as a distant scholar pretending to make so-called objective and universal claims about the world, but as a Martinican man of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century concerned with the ways in which the explorer had approached the Caribbean, and in general peoples and cultures that were not his own: as others that he wanted to submit to ‘the Transparent’ in order to see (through) them, and thus, to understand and hold control over them. According to Glissant, and I follow him here, opacity is capable of disrupting this condition; it is a force that drives communities and cultures alike to, simultaneously, escape from and resist hierarchical and objectifying models of understanding installed by the explorer, yet still current in our days.

Accentuating the great potential of opacity, Glissant insists on accepting the other’s claim to it. This amounts to acknowledging that we do not need to understand others to be able to love them, neither to work or play with them, to suspending all efforts to objectify differences and, instead, surrender to what we cannot understand, and, ultimately, it amounts to preventing that anybody or anything, out of an objectifying and hierarchical desire for comprehension, is grabbed by the grubby hands of the other. It is in this sense also that opacity can be equated with freedom. “Their opacity”, Glissant writes, “is nothing after all but their freedom.”<sup>400</sup>

In my view, the darkness of *Aunque vayamos* has a lot in common with opacity as Glissant approaches it. To start with, it is a force, or my preferred term, a vitality, that is capable of doing things. By this I mean not just any things, I consider that the black matter of Ayón’s image effectively shields whatever is intended to remain secret; any occult reality of Abakuá or maybe something else we are even less aware of. It must be said: of the esoteric knowledge of the brotherhood, Ayón was arguably just as little aware as we are—which is exactly as it should be. Abakuá is a society of esoteric knowledge and mutual aid that allows only men of so-called good behavior to be members and, thus, to access its secrets. Somebody’s place in the hierarchy determines the degree to which the occult is disclosed: the higher the position one occupies, the more secrets are revealed. Yet, what exactly is considered secret is under dispute. There are those who believe that nothing related to the brotherhood can be spoken about—that the initiate’s family members cannot even know whether they are members or not. Some consider that only the rituals and the sacred texts about the Cross River civilization of Nigeria and Cameroon are secret.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>400</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville, 1992), p. 256.

<sup>401</sup> Ivor L. Miller, “The Relationship between Early Forms of Literacy in Old Calabar and Inherited Manuscripts of the Cuban Abakuá Society,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 35, no. 2 (2018): p. 163

Wherever the secret lies, one thing is beyond question: Ayón was not in a position of drawing too near to it. Being a woman, and therefore inevitably uninitiated, she was the first to stumble upon Abakuá's barriers. There is a general mistrust towards people who try to get close, for the members of the brotherhood know that they can only survive by virtue of their secrecy.<sup>402</sup> However, they know too that they cannot shut themselves off from the outside world and they recognize that the research carried out by artists like Belkis Ayón, as well as by scholars such as Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera, has the capacity to challenge the extremely pejorative and racist categorization of Abakuá initiates as criminals, sorcerers, savages, bandits, primitives, and thieves.<sup>403</sup>

How to keep outsiders remote enough as to not show them anything that only the initiated can perceive, yet close enough as to foster respect and acceptance? That has been the conundrum on the part of the Abakuá. The conundrum for Ayón was different, yet equally delicate: how to work with the brotherhood's secret knowledge without disrespecting its sanctity?<sup>404</sup> As outsiders, we are indebted to Abakuá initiates and researchers such as Gregorio Hernández (El Goyo) and Tato Quiñones for an answer. They assure us that Ayón deeply respected the secrets and was, likewise, considerate of not trespassing any boundaries.<sup>405</sup> In a certain sense, this could be taken literally. On several occasions, the artist accompanied these men, who were also her friends, to Abakuá ceremonies. With them, she visited some *plantas* (initiation ceremonies), *Nlloros* (funeral ceremonies), as well as *barokos* (initiation

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<sup>402</sup> For the centrality of secrecy in the Abakuá brotherhood, see: Ivor L. Miller, "A Secret Society Goes Public: The Relationship Between Abakuá and Cuban Popular Culture" *Afro-Hispanic Review* 43, no. 1 (2000): pp. 161-188. The renowned scholar on Afro-Cuban religions and Abakuá priest (babalawo) Tato Quiñones writes openly and fascinatingly about the issue as well in: Tato Quiñones, "Belkis Grasped the Transcendent Significance of Ritual," in *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*, ed. Alex Fleites (Madrid: Turner, 2010) p. 284. He writes: "Ñañigos are prone to «secrecy.» It is something very crazy and interesting, and I believe that it is determined by the need to safeguard identity; a personal identity residing mainly in a cultural manifestation such as ñañiguismo, brushed aside and repressed for centuries. A ñañigo tries to maintain the kind of exclusivity that makes him a person who defines a place in which he may even reach the top of the hierarchy within a racist society that excludes and ignores him. It is a tiny meeting place where he feels, and actually is, an important person."

<sup>403</sup> For a history on how Abakuá has historically been perceived in Cuba, see: Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, p. 292. Researchers and initiates such as Tato Quiñones and Gregorio Hernández (El Goyo) articulated that they and their fellow members profoundly appreciated the work by Ayón and the mentioned scholars. In their short texts published in Ayón's catalogue raisonné, they share their distress concerning the bad reputation of Abakuá. Tato Quiñones is particularly inflicted by the rumors suggesting that "a hidden action by ñañigos" was the reason for the Ayón's suicide. See: Tato Quiñones, "Belkis Grasped the Transcendent Significance of Ritual," in *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*, ed. Alex Fleites (Madrid: Turner, 2010) p. 284. El Goyo writes, precisely about the importance of Ayón's work in offering another perspective on Abakuá: "People like Belkis, Lydia Cabrera, Fernando Ortiz, and others who have worked on this theme, have corrected the negative opinions on the religion and its members" and "I am grateful for her [Lydia Carbera's] work because, among other things, it refutes all the infamous things that were said about the Abakuá — that they ate children, killed, murdered." See: Gregorio Hernández (El Goyo), "Belkis's Work Makes Cubans Better Known," in *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*, ed. Alex Fleites (Madrid: Turner, 2010) p. 281

<sup>404</sup> The cultural historian and specialist in the African diaspora in the Caribbean Ivor Miller asked a similar question in a personal email he sent to me on February 26, 2021: How to talk about Abakuá's history and culture without profaning?

<sup>405</sup> "There is nothing disrespectful towards the Abakuá religion in her work, nor does she reveal anything improper" asserts Gregorio Hernández. For reference, see: Hernández, "Belkis's Work Makes Cubans Better Known," in *Nkame*, p. 281-282 and Tato Quiñones, "Belkis Grasped the Transcendent Significant of Ritual", p. 283-284, in Fleites, *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*,

ceremonies into priesthood of more advanced members).<sup>406</sup> Yet, she never joined them into the sacred temple, the Fambá, where the most important parts—that is to say, the secret parts—of the ceremonies occurred. In their testimonies, El Goyo and Quiñones underline that Ayón humbly waited outside “on a rickety bench”.<sup>407</sup> From there, it is likely that she heard the sacred drums and the singing, while we know for sure that she saw some elements of the *Nlorro*. Quiñones recollects that the artist witnessed how the *Íreme*, the little devil dressed in black that is central to the brotherhood, crawled into the temple, and that she was present as well during the procession that followed on the ceremony.<sup>408</sup>

### Restricted Access

When facing *Aunque vayamos*, I find myself in a similar position as Ayón with respect to the Abakuá ceremonies: I get a glimpse of what is in front of me, but I fail to enter completely. The darkness pulls me in, acquaints me with its material splendor, yet, simultaneously, pushes me back. This play of attraction and repulsion that Ayón’s work performs reminds of the actions of several texts Doris Sommer examines in her book *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (1999). She sees, perhaps as one of the first literary scholars who engages with minority writing, that some books do not want to open up completely to their readers. They “slap and embrace” Sommer writes after Afro-American author Toni Morrison.<sup>409</sup> Astonishing the presumptuous reader who assumes that texts are, inevitably, desirous of developing a close relationship with them, Sommer shows how some Latin American and African American literary works refuse intimacy and are, likewise, reluctant to being accessed. They are willingly unwelcoming, or, as is closer to Sommer’s own wording, purposefully incomprehensible, and the readings they permit are “between stop signs and warnings against trespassing”.<sup>410</sup> Among the ways in which she refers to them is as “a walled city”.<sup>411</sup>

I ask myself: could there be a metaphor for Glissant’s concept of opacity that is more appropriate than a “walled city”? There is a fortuitous closeness between Sommer’s invocation of texts that cannot be accessed and Glissant’s suggestion of people and cultures that remain incomprehensible, and exactly this closeness draws them near to Didi-Huberman too.<sup>412</sup> In all their theories, the verb to grasp surfaces when they write about questions related to the understanding of others—whether these others are texts, people, or artworks. This can be as explicit as Sommer writing that comprehension “still means grasping” and as evocative as Didi-Huberman suggesting that art history books “know how to give us

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<sup>406</sup> Gregorio Hernández (El Goyo), “Belkis’s Work Makes Cubans Better Known”, in *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*, ed. Alex Fleites (Madrid: Turner, 2010) p. 281

<sup>407</sup> Tato Quiñones, “Belkis Grasped the Transcendent Significance of Ritual,” in *Nkame. Belkis Ayón*, ed. Alex Fleites (Madrid: Turner, 2010) p. 284

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, p. ix

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., p. 15; Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 3

<sup>411</sup> Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, p. 10

<sup>412</sup> Sommer published *Proceed with Caution* in 1999, nearly a decade after Glissant published his *Poétique de la relation* in 1990, yet Glissant was not part of Sommer’s theoretical framework. She reached at very similar conceptualizations as the literary scholar in dialogue with, mainly, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

the impression of an object truly grasped and reconnoitered in its every aspect”.<sup>413</sup> In Glissant’s work, the equivalency between understanding and grasping is most fundamental. It typifies for him the Western outlook on the world, in which whatever and whomever is strange should be drawn toward oneself and held firmly for the sake of becoming fully knowable. While differing in their approach, the diagnosis by Glissant, Sommer and Didi-Huberman is similar: understanding in the sense of grasping is extremely harmful, especially to people from the Global South and artworks made by minorities. It suggests the “devouring” of alterity, as well as the “ingesting”, the “eating” and appropriation of the other, writes Sommer after, respectively, Walter Benjamin, Oswald de Andrade, and bell hooks.<sup>414</sup> Appropriation is yet another term that links Sommer to Glissant. He too considers that for the Westerner understanding the other implies necessarily a gesture of “enclosure if not appropriation”.<sup>415</sup> A certain fatality thus lurks in the Western act of understanding both authors demonstrate, for does not appropriation mean also the annihilation of difference? The prospect of death or disaster is even more explicitly present in Didi-Huberman’s work. When he writes about the effects of our ability to fully grasp an artwork, seeing “everything that it was possible to see”, he cannot but determine that “art is over” it is “finally dead”.<sup>416</sup>

### **Understanding as a Colonial Enterprise**

Both Glissant and Sommer equate the kind of comprehension that entails grasping with Western colonial attitudes. While Sommer does not directly examine the coloniality implicit in understanding, it crops up through all the pages of *Proceed with Caution*. The reader is systematically framed as being driven by the desire to conquer a book, that is, to acquire “complete understanding” of it and likewise to master it.<sup>417</sup> “We take up an unyielding book to conquer it” Sommer writes, and as soon as we have done so, she assures, “we proceed to the next conquest.”<sup>418</sup> Glissant shares with Sommer the conviction that the urge to understand is bound up with the desire of conquest. According to him, when there were yet not more territories left to “discover” and colonize, the white man turned to the peoples and their cultures:

Since the beginning of this century the shrinking of unexplored regions on the map of the world has made minds less infatuated with adventure, or less sensitive to its beauty, inclining more toward a concern for the truth of human beings. Understanding cultures then became more gratifying than discovering new lands.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, p. x

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>415</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 192

<sup>416</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 42

<sup>417</sup> Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, p. 27

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11

<sup>419</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 26

This short passage is indicative of something fundamental: the Westerner approaches “unexplored” cultures with the same spirit of discovery and conquest and, hence, with the same desire to extract from them anything that could enrich him. At the base of Western thought lies the eagerness to explore and make one’s own whatever aspect of the unexplored culture could be beneficial to himself, be that knowledges, ideas, habits, customs, or traditions. As with colonization, Glissant shows, extraction alone was not enough. The people, to the same degree as the lands, are to be subjected to the Westerner’s system of measurement and control. Their differences are to be “relate[d] to my norm” and they are to be admitted “to existence within my system.”<sup>420</sup>

There are more Caribbean literary scholars and poets that regard Western models of understanding as a colonial enterprise primarily directed at taking from the other, reducing them, and holding control over them, and who, similarly, helped us see that the Western approach to comprehension is actually a colonial whitewashing of the other, an annihilation of the unknown. In a very short essay, *Isla Incógnita* (1973), Walcott compares two manners to deal with an unknown plant: the one of the botanists of the old world, who gave it a scientific name and placed it in a standardized system, and the one he considers as his own, abounding in confusion and doubt. He does not know what family the plant comes from, nor where it can be found, but that does not matter to him. Walcott asserts: “I now believe that my ignorance is more correct than his knowledge, that my privilege makes it correct as quietly as Adam’s, or Crusoe’s, and that what it reminds me of, its metaphor, is more important than the family it springs from.”<sup>421</sup> Tantamount to Glissant, Sommer, and Didi-Huberman, Walcott does not aspire to make the unknown plant into a circumscribed and dead object of knowledge which has to be submitted to a system of classification: he does not extract it from its environment, does not reacclimatize it in an artificial one, does not attach a “Latin-tagged label” to it, or, what he considers even worse, a “tag with the name of the ‘discoverer’”.<sup>422</sup> Instead, he leaves it just where it belongs, among the other plants, and he acknowledges its creole or country name according to its medicinal, magical or edible properties. In case it does not have properties, he asserts, “it remains anonymous, always to be rediscovered, to remain looking like something else.”<sup>423</sup> To accept for something never to be known, to stay out of any box, is intrepid because it suggests a radical critique of established—yet colonial—approaches to unknown things; of “old botanical names” and “old processes” as Walcott says, but more so because it could easily seem to be naïve and perhaps even indicative of an anti-scientific attitude. To accept for something to eschew all categorizations is also extremely invigorating, because

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid. p. 190

<sup>421</sup> Derek Walcott, “Isla Incógnita”, 1973, in *Caribbean Literature and the Environment. Between Nature and Culture*, eds. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson and George B. Handley (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 56

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

it opens up entirely new apprehensions of the unknown: through metaphor. This is, in fact, for Walcott our only true apprehension.<sup>424</sup>

Looking with other eyes is also central to the manifesto *In Praise of Creoleness* (1990) by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant. In their reflection on the mosaic culture of the Antilles, the authors distinguish the eyes of the colonizer (of Europe) from the eyes of the colonized people (the Caribbeans). Yet unlike Walcott, for whom the colonial gaze characterized the foreign botanist, these Martinican authors consider that they themselves looked through colonial and exoticizing eyes. These are eyes, claiming themselves universal; eyes pretending to see so much, yet aware of so little. The writing of Chamoiseau and his companions could be seen as emanating from the painful condition that “we have seen the world through the filter of western values, and our foundation was ‘exoticized’ by the French vision we had to adopt.”<sup>425</sup> Or better, as rising up against this painful condition. It is a reclaiming of the eyes that became detached from their own bodies: an exchange of the outsider’s perspective for an interior vision. With this “new look” new things came into vision, both regarding the Martinican environment as well as the Martinican identity. Yet, to put into words what this is proves to be complex, even impossible. Or perhaps, lingering on how difficult it is to delineate Creole identity is the closest one could actually get to it, for “complexity is the very principle of our identity.”<sup>426</sup> Under the colonial gaze, this complexity has remained out of sight. What is even worse, under the colonial gaze complexity has been designated as abnormality: “the need for clarification based on two or three laws of normality, made us consider ourselves as abnormal beings.”<sup>427</sup> Following Glissant, the authors of this manifesto see that being understood completely entails subjugation. However, they take another direction than their predecessor did, and unlike Glissant this recognition does not lead them to opacity. It brings them back to their own eyes, to their own vision of themselves. Looking at themselves they realize “that what seemed to be a defect may turn out to be the indeterminacy of the new, the richness of the unknown,” the never seen before.<sup>428</sup> We also read that the confrontation with the unknown is much more than the result of a quest for identity: it is part of their resistance against colonial ways of looking and against their desire for clarity and transparency too.

Artworks are not plants of course, even though they are alive too, and neither are they to be mentioned in the same breath as environments or cultures. But there are certain aspects that Walcott as well as Chamoiseau-and-co emphasize regarding the approach to these entities that synchronize with how Ayón’s prints desire to be treated. First, these dark collagraphs works want the observers to respect their anonymity and covertness and they want to abstain the observers from submitting them to the mechanisms of classification and control developed by the discoverer. Second, they want the observer

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid., p. 57

<sup>425</sup> Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité. In Praise of Creoleness* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 76

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

to regard them differently, to adapt another kind of look, a look that is so much more than a look because it involves touch too. I have called this a haptic look before, a designation I owe to Marks and which she defines as “a look that uses the eye like an organ of touch”.<sup>429</sup>

### Understanding by Giving Up on Understanding

It is in the company of the aforementioned theorists that we can come closer to an understanding of Ayón’s *Aunque Vayamos*. Although this seems paradoxical because understanding in this case resides in acknowledging that the print does not want to be understood, or at least, does not want to be understood in the modern and colonial sense of the word. It wants, even commands, the observer to adapt an alternative form of understanding, and likewise to cease aiming for clarity and exhaustive knowledge. It commands the observer to stop trying to clarify the image, be it through applying the iconographic method or by consulting the highest Abakuá priests, for every such attempt would imply a violation of its anonymity.

In its desire not to be understood, *Aunque vayamos*’s darkness takes on a significant role. It is this matter that pulls the observers in, that lets our eyes and fingers literally sink into it, and that allows us to see and feel its rich texture. In the parts that the darkness is dense and plain, it is almost as if the matter caresses us, maybe tickles us a bit if we stroll over it rapidly. Yet if we get too curious and try to ingress certain places, the dark matter is also the first in pushing us out. There are parts in which it is so rough, or so full of cuts and grooves, that it seems as if the matter were scratching or grazing our skin just to make us leave. That is to say that in Ayón’s prints, darkness is what seduces us while at the same time it keeps us at a distance, “at arm’s length” as Sommer would say.<sup>430</sup> This dual yet ambiguous capacity of darkness to pull us in and to push us out should not be underestimated. It is suggestive of the force with which it protects the not-to-be-accessed and with which it keeps the observer at bay. In this respect, Ayón’s images also share something foundational with Abakuá. To the same degree that the brotherhood protects and safeguards its secret knowledge by only allowing outsiders to stay at the threshold, *Aunque vayamos* resists full comprehension by covering large parts of the scene in black ink, as well as by having the matter sting and cut the intruder.

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While my reflections on Ayón’s prints have by now come to an end, there is one element that will travel with me from her work to the work by the Colombian artist María Isabel Rueda, and thereby, from this chapter to the next. It concerns its black ink, its dark matter. In the pages to come, it will become apparent that the black ink traversing Ayón’s oeuvre also constitutes Rueda’s short animation *Horror Vacui*.

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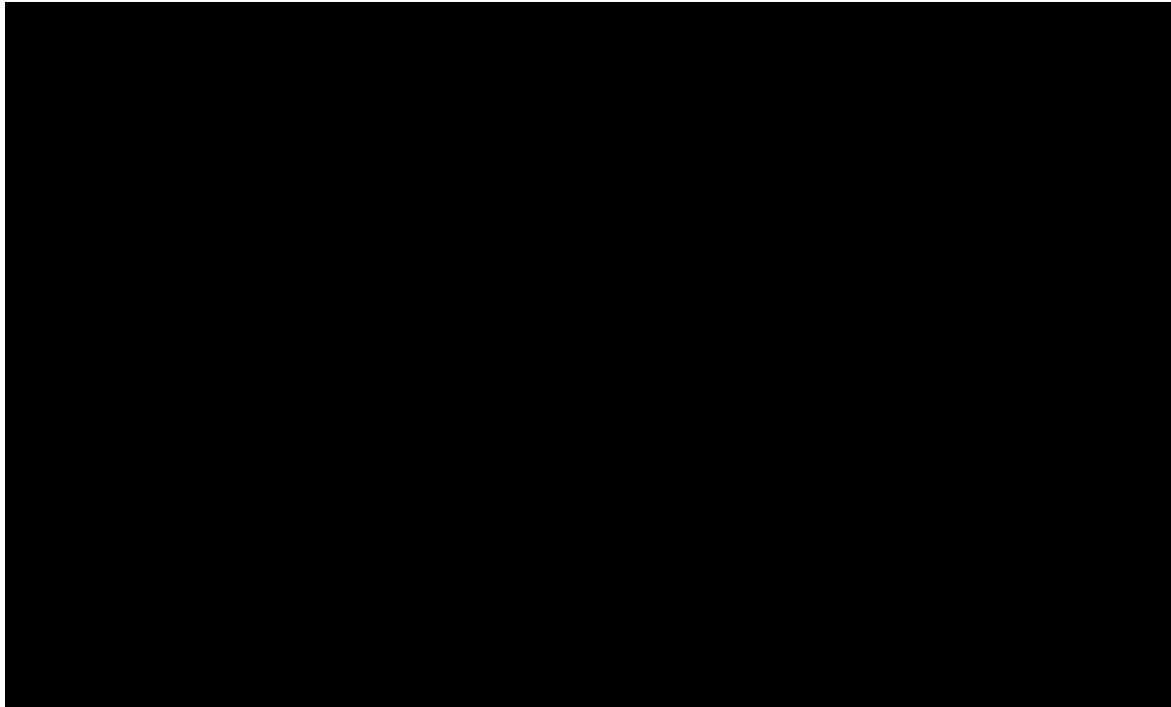
<sup>429</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch. Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p.105

<sup>430</sup> Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, p. xi

What is more, the matter is in Rueda's animation equally suggestive of a certain primordially: as is the case for Ayón's prints, everything begins in *Horror Vacui* with dark matter. In the first scene of the film, there is just darkness, only black ink. Yet it is not only the darkness of Ayón's work that I will continue to cling to in what remains of this dissertation, and it is not only matter that connects the collagraphs with the animation. They share an inclination to the occult too, and they both leave me with the sensation that there is so much happening in front of me that I cannot, should not, and do not want to capture or comprehend.

**low wave 3~Sedimentation**

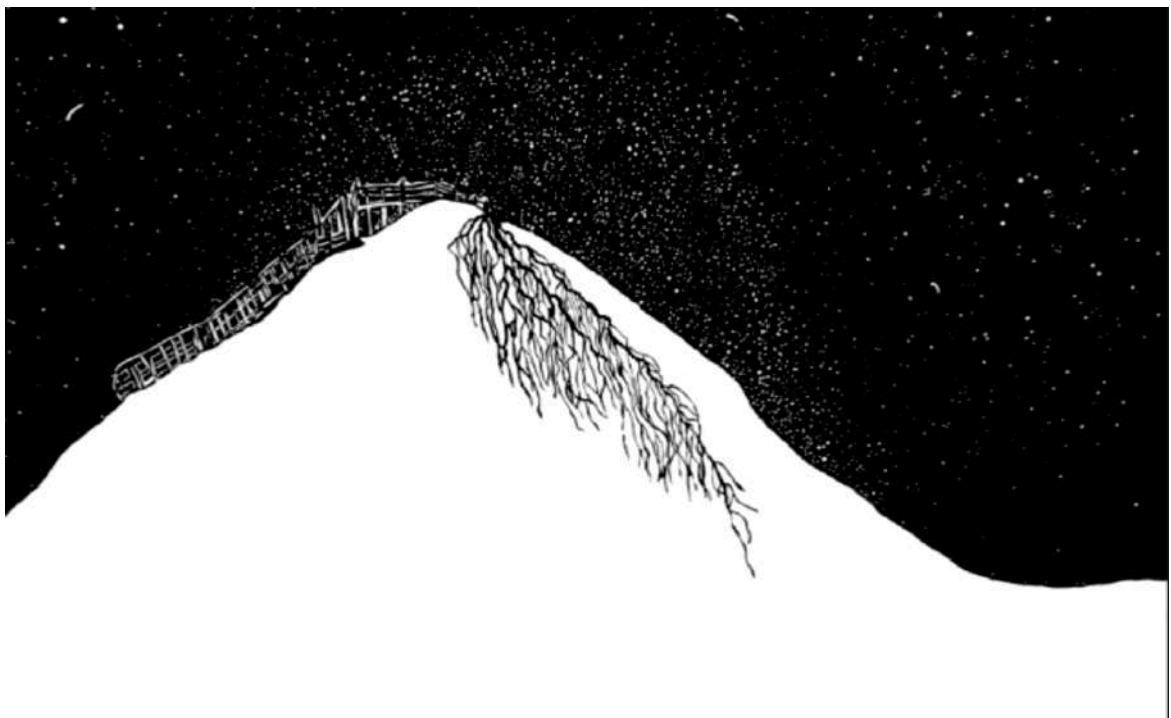
**María Isabel Rueda's *Horror Vacui*: Darkness in the Tropics**



**Figure 7.1** María Isabel Rueda, *Horror Vacui*, 2007, animation video, still, 0:00

**Scene 1 (figure 7.1)**

There is just black. Total darkness. No sound.



**Figure 7.2** María Isabel Rueda, *Horror Vacui*, 2007, animation video, still, 0:04

### Scene 2 (figure 7.2)

A snow-white volcano resembling a women's breast emerges out of the black void. It is enveloped by a heaven as dark as the darkest one I have ever seen and quickly fills itself with twinkling stars. Initially, they appear just around the crater, but soon they are just about everywhere and take over the darkness with their glow. As the sky transforms, so does the volcano/breast. Just as rapidly, it becomes permeated by what could either be roots, veins, or lactiferous ducts. It is impossible to tell the difference. Whatever they are, they start to develop right next to the peak and branch out with high speed to the base. All this happens while we hear a tremendous noise of ice, snow, and rock falling down a mountainside.



Figure 7.3 María Isabel Rueda, *Horror Vacui*, 2007, animation video, still, 0:16

### Scene 3 (figure 7.3)

A black crow, depicted in profile and right in front of a full moon, peeks at two reindeer under an equally black, starry heaven that suddenly start having intercourse when in the middle of the scene, the stag jumps on top of the cow. The crow is depicted from so nearby that it is possible to see the plumage covering his head, the tiny feathers right at the base of its beak, and the glow in its eye. Such detail does not apply to the reindeer engaged in their intimate act. Only their outlines can be perceived, as well as a glimpse of the cedar forest that surrounds them. A stream of wind blows through the scene, which becomes particularly evident through the moving ferns at the top and the grass at the bottom of the frame. There is a line (is it a cord?) connecting the neck of the crow to something or someplace impossible to define (is it a membrane? is it plasma? is it limbo?). In this scene too, an ominous sound emerges, of a rattling crow, and by the end, a primal human scream.



**Figure 7.4** María Isabel Rueda, *Horror Vacui*, 2007, animation video, still, 0:23



**Figure 7.5** María Isabel Rueda, *Horror Vacui*, 2007, animation video, still, 0:36

#### **Scene 4 (figure 7.4 and 7.5)**

The crow's eye takes over the entire picture frame. Its eyelids are white, just as its pupil, while the iris consists of the same black starry night as we have seen before. Then all of a sudden, the pupil appears in greater close-up, and proves not to be as pure white as it had seemed, neither as round as I believed

it to be. It has the shape of an egg and is considerably larger than the other celestial bodies in its surroundings. The pupil/egg sinks deeper into space and starts getting covered with abstract black spots and dots. In its lower right, what I take for yet another pupil/egg comes into being. Next, and after trembling a bit, the dubious object catches fire and small irregular lines start to traverse its top part. They are either bursts, cracks or, as with the volcano, roots. Again, there is a menacing sound, but now it is not clear what to make of it. It seems to be a computer-based mix between a roar and a horn that comes closer and closer and gets louder and louder, until eventually, when reaching its peak, it stops.



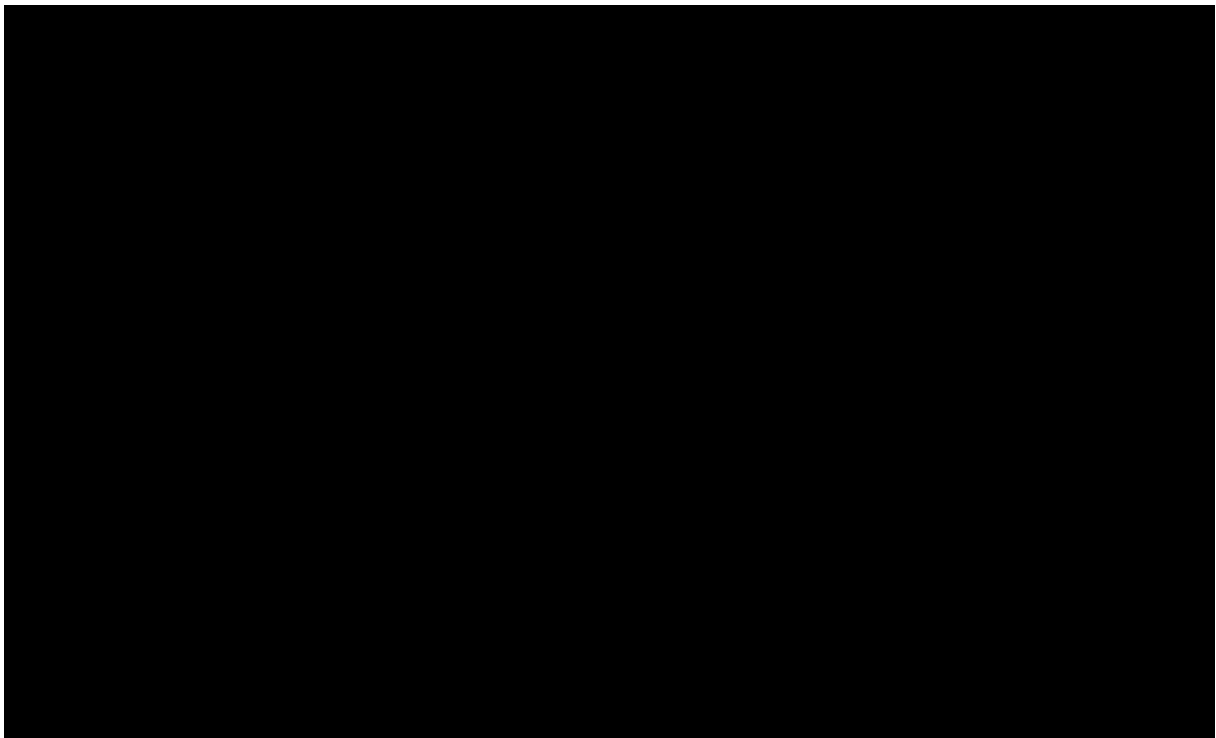
**Figure 7.6** María Isabel Rueda, *Horror Vacui*, 2007, animation video, still, 0:43



**Figure 7.7** María Isabel Rueda, *Horror Vacui*, 2007, animation video, still, 0:50

### Scene 5 (figure 7.6 and 7.7)

A young man in the lower right part of the image looks through binoculars at some birds flying amidst the starry night sky. He is completely still, but everything around him is in motion. The birds flutter around each other and the celestial bodies sparkle and twinkle. As the stars brighten, lightning strikes the pupil/egg, which then erupts as if it were a volcano. It does not blow lava, neither mud, into the atmosphere but eggshell, some liquid substance, and equally undefined fragmented elements. I hear a couple of chirping birds, then thunder, and last, the same birds chirping more intensely.



**Figure 7.8** María Isabel Rueda, *Horror Vacui*, 2007, animation video, still, 0:55

### Scene 6 (figure 7.8)

There is just black. Total darkness. No sound.

The entire sequence starts all over again, ad infinitum. The video is played in loop.

Together, these five scenes enrolling in less than a minute constitute the animation video *Horror Vacui* (2007) by Colombian artist María Isabel Rueda.<sup>431</sup> They follow on each other in a pace so fast, and they manifest a sequence of occurrences so occult, so mystical, and so unnerving, that each attempt to give a

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<sup>431</sup> The animation can be seen online via this link: <https://flic.kr/p/2nkbt5y>

rational explanation will fail.<sup>432</sup> The invocation of the volcano that is at the same time a woman's breast, of a crow's pupil that is simultaneously an egg, an egg that is also a celestial body, yet erupts as if it were a volcano, suggests not only that between the diverse elements constituting the work's universes exist structural similarities, or correspondences, but also that there are no foundational differences between these elements in the sense that they are all "permeated by the flow of a living energy".<sup>433</sup> In this enigmatic realm, there are no clear boundaries between inanimate and animate entities, between the objective, identifiable world of night skies, blowing wind, and mating animals, and the subjective, inexplicable, world of morphing creatures, altering galaxies, and sudden explosions. Everything and everybody, whether animal, plant, or human, whether object or creature, whether celestial or earthly, is animated by a certain life force, or perhaps, a certain destructive force.

As the video proceeds, it becomes evident that there are no possibilities to escape from a ruinous faith. Neither the birds, the eggs, and the reindeer, nor the volcanos, the forests, and the skies, prove to have the possibility to persist, and they all move, fatalistically, towards their own destruction. At the end of each of *Horror Vacui*'s scenes, it is as if everything stops, disappears, and is replaced for something completely unforeseen and altogether different. That is, an entirely new environment where nothing, or near to nothing, of what was before remains and where the events that take place seem totally unrelated to the events that preceded it. Apart from identifying the destructive force that traverses the animation's constitutive scenes, it seems impossible to link the scenes to each other in any convincing manner. And this creates, in me at least, an internal conflict. On the one hand, the fact that the scenes follow on each other creates the impression that they must in some way affect one another and, likewise, be indicative of some kind of narrative. On the other hand, the ceaseless disappearance and destructions after each scene nullify that impression and make me incline towards the belief that *Horror Vacui* manifests a series of autonomous events occurring in highly distinct environments. They make me incline towards the belief that whatever happens in the animation goes beyond the unfolding of a story.

My incapacity to define whether *Horror Vacui* is suggestive of a narrative or a non-narrative, and my subsequent compromise that is neither one nor the other, but in between both, liminal, matches with other incapacities to define and it matches with other compromises. In addition to being in between narrative and non-narrative, I see Rueda's video as foregrounding an environment that is in between an

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<sup>432</sup> While I am aware of the derogatory meaning oftentimes given to mysticism as, so the Oxford English Dictionary states, a "Religious belief that is characterized by vague, obscure, or confused spirituality; a belief system based on the assumption of occult forces, mysterious supernatural agencies, etc.", I understand the term primarily as being indicative of the transcendence of boundaries (between humans and things, animate subject and inanimate objects, the objective and the subjective world, etc.) For my understanding of mysticism, I am indebted to the scholar of religion Annette Wilke. In the *Brill Dictionary of Religion*, she defines mysticism as "umbrella concept for (1) experiences in which boundaries are dissolved—those of the subject, such as in a vacuum of thought, or in ecstasy; those of the object, so that dualities are removed; those of space, to experience the infinite in the finite; those of time, when the 'timeless, everlasting now' replaces successive time." Kocu von Stuckrad (ed.), *Brill Dictionary of Religion* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), p.1279

<sup>433</sup> Kocu von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism. A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2005), p. 4

existing volcanic landscape in South-East Colombia and some imagined landscape of a cold and dark country in the North, and as suggestive of a medium that can neither be fully defined as moving images (animation) nor as still ones (drawing). The volcano that nearly takes over the screen in the first scene, and that is symbolized later through the eruption of the pupil/eye, is an accurate representation of the inactive mud-volcano near Colombia's Caribbean coast, the *Volcán de Lodo el Totumo*.<sup>434</sup> The crow, the reindeer, and the cedar tree in the subsequent scene typify the flora and fauna of some cold, sun-deprived country in the North. Regarding my suggestion that *Horror Vacui* is neither just a composition of moving images, nor of still ones: of the drawings that form the base for the video, there are always just a few elements that move, the rest remains motionless. If we look at the second scene, for example, we see that except for a mild wind moving the ferns, the grass, and a few feathers of the bird's beak, there is no motion whatsoever in the first instances. The reindeer are still, and so are the trees, the bird, and everything else. Only a bit later, we start to detect some movement in the sky, which fills itself with stars, and then suddenly, the stag jumps on top of the female. But again, most is just still, motionless, without a sign of activity. Also, and also again, the few movements that we can perceive are very subtle, very slight.

The awareness that in *Horror Vacui* all things and all bodies dissolve in no time, that we are witnessing how a narrative unfolds and yet we are not, and that we are simultaneously looking at still and moving images, makes it hard to locate the work into some scheme of evaluation and develop any judgement about it. All these issues account for the complexity to, as we have seen Didi-Huberman write before, "reconnoiter" it "in its every aspect".<sup>435</sup> How can we come to terms with a video that is at the same time an animation and a sequence of still images? How to write anything meaningful about scenes that erupt upon unfolding, about a sequence of realities where nothing endures? And, perhaps even more than anything else, how to situate a universe, or a series of universes, that are so close to ours and yet so far from them? How to relate to universes where agency is widespread across the diverse elements when we as modern people have been convinced so firmly that we are the only ones capable of taking action?

The animation's suggestion that agency is not only the province of humans, but that non-human beings and things too, that is volcanos, eyes, and eggs, are endowed with a capacity for action is—as I have alluded to insistently in this dissertation—in direct conflict with the principles of modernity. The modern and enlightened, who have firmly believed in, and constructed their societies on, the careful distinction between nature and culture, object and subject, and passive and inert matter as opposed to active and acting humans, would most likely find it horrendous to see Rueda's universes unfolding in front of their eyes. These universes they would probably understand as emanating from occult and magical, and thus ignorant and irrational, beliefs. That is, beliefs that they have associated with children,

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<sup>434</sup> The *Volcán de Lodo el Totumo* is a recurring element in Rueda's oeuvre.

<sup>435</sup> Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, p. x

illiterate masses, savages, and the inhabitants of the colonies.<sup>436</sup> While according to modern European intellectuals, magic and occultism never completely disappeared from European societies, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century it was linked essentially to non-European peoples.<sup>437</sup> The scholar of religion and culture Randall Styers demonstrates how at the peak of European colonization, tropes of the “Indian” as uncivilized and incapable of reason, and the “Negro” as sorcerer or magician became increasingly widespread. He demonstrated too that, by then, magic started to be framed as “an aberrational mode of thought antithetical to the dominant cultural logic” (rather than a sin, as was the case in previous times).<sup>438</sup> It became a symptom, so he writes, “of psychological impairment and a marker of racial or cultural inferiority.”<sup>439</sup> It is beyond doubt that framings as these were highly beneficial to the European colonizers.<sup>440</sup> They offered them the pretext to convince friends and enemies that the subjugation of overseas countries to their own, the conquering and exploiting of their lands and populations, was actually advantageous to the colonized themselves. In the first place because, by so doing, they were in fact assuming responsibility for “civilizing the savage inhabitants of these territories” or “driving them to disappear.”<sup>441</sup> In the second place, because, by so doing, they were taking on the related, supposedly altruistic, task of “diffusing the principles and example of European liberty, enlightenment, and reason.”<sup>442</sup>

My argument with respect to Rueda’s work is the following: by creating considerably dark and ominous universes that are alternately suggestive of Northern and Southern landscapes, that are inhabited by composite creatures emerging out of the fusion between animate beings and supposedly inanimate things, and that are differentiated by unexplainable occurrences and a shared agency for each and all, *Horror Vacui* does two things. First, it brings geographic and environmental elements, as well as artistic genres, associated with Nordic landscapes to the tropics (which will be elaborated on by the end of this chapter). And second, it advances an alternative to the racist and colonial modern paradigm that has degraded into magical, irrational, and benighted pathologies all those systems of belief that foreground the vital force of humans, non-humans, and things alike. In many cases, this could be

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<sup>436</sup>After philosopher-anthropologist and historian of science Bruno Latour published his book *We Have Never Been Modern* in 1991, the question surged if it is in any sense accurate to ever speak of modern people. In this book he argues that the modern belief in nature and culture as two distinct domains may have made us believe that we were modern, but that upon the realization that they are in fact “born together, as inseparable as Siamese twins who hug or hit each other without ceasing to belong to the same body” we stop having been modern. And thus, undermine the basis for the belief that the modern, Western, man can distinguish himself from other places (other cultures) and times (the premodern past). Furthermore, under what Latour calls the climate war, everyone, the historians of science and the people alike, cannot but be aware that the effort of the Moderns to deanimate the world has been to no avail. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). See also Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 15, 72

<sup>437</sup> Randall Styers, *Making Magic. Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 66

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., p. 27, 66

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., p.27

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., p. 60

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

translated as those systems of belief and types of knowledge that have been foundational to indigenous and Afro-Latin American populations in Colombia and other Latin American countries. Although Rueda, unlike the previously discussed Ayón, never revealed exactly which creation myths or cosmologies informed her practice, she has repeatedly expressed that it emanates from her research of and lived experience with indigenous and Afro-Caribbean spiritualities, whether or not esoteric.<sup>443</sup>

It would be an underestimation to consider that in *Horror Vacui* opposites exist alongside each other peacefully, just as much as it would be a misapprehension to understand that they overpower one another. Similar to the other artworks examined in this dissertation, *Horror Vacui* evidences that opposites can meet and mingle, materially and metaphorically, without giving up any of their proper force or particularity and without forming a compositional third entity. As I have argued before, this is the case for the sequence of scenes (suggestive of neither a narrative nor a non-narrative), the depicted environment (not just in the North, but not only in the South either) and the medium as such (nor simply drawings, but also not a conventional animation), but, as might be most relevant in the frame of this study, it also is the case for darkness and light, and its allies, black and white, and obscurity and clarity. More so than blending together, harmonically, as to form one whole, they demonstrate they can get quite rough on each other. They antagonize each other, vie with each other, challenge each other, and yet at no point does it lead to the ingestion, extinction, or disappearance of one in favor of the other. Or at least, that is what we can hold onto until the last few seconds of the video. At the end and at the beginning (or is this the same in *Horror Vacui*?), there is just darkness, primordial and/or apocalyptic darkness.

The fierce and contentious engagement between the diverse manifestations of darkness and light make me designate *Horror Vacui* as a chiaroscuro, like so many of the other artworks discussed in this dissertation. Chiaroscuro in the sense of consisting, materially, of near to total darkness alongside flickering stars, white volcanos, and other bright elements. The drawings that form the basis for *Horror Vacui*, and for Rueda's oeuvre in general, are composed of black ink that almost completely covers a white paper.<sup>444</sup> I too see the animation as a chiaroscuro because of the sensation of paradox it provokes in me: on the one hand, I recognize clearly the universes that open up to me in Rueda's work, yet on the other, I am utterly confused about what is happening in them and how to relate the mystical occurrences to each other. The deeper I sink into these universes, the more I am persuaded that there is yet another way of understanding chiaroscuro in Rueda's animation, a way that will furthermore allow me to consider the previously discussed works in another light. I argue that in *Horror Vacui*, a sense of obscurity, gloom, and peril invades an environment that is evocative of the Colombian Caribbean, that

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<sup>443</sup> During the many conversations I had with the artists, she stressed that ever since she was a student in Cartagena, she had a profound interest in the spiritual beliefs of indigenous people and African descendants in Colombia and Latin America at large. She conducted (artistic) research into the beliefs and practices of the Kogi and Arhuaco people of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, of healers from Mexico and Bolivia, and of Santería-initiates in Cuba.

<sup>444</sup> Mostly, the white of *Horror Vacui* and other drawings comes from the paper itself, although in exceptional cases also a bit of white acrylic paint was added. Such was the case for example for the stars illuminating the sky: some of them were added only after the sky was colored black. Rueda applies the black ink to the paper with different kinds of pens and brushes.

is to say the tropics, a region associated with excessive heat and light, as well as with sensuality and exotism.<sup>445</sup> As I wrote before, the *lactatious* breast/rooting volcano that is represented in the beginning of the video, and continues manifesting its spirit through the successive vibrations and eruptions, depicts the well-known mud-volcano, *Volcán de Lodo el Totumo*, in the Colombian Caribbean. From the onset, it is to be suspected that eventually the threat will become too great, the avalanche will come too close, for the volcano and all else to persist. And this is the case indeed: in a flash, everything disappears and an environment equally obscure, gloomy, and unnerving, yet evocative of some country around the North Atlantic emerges. An unidentifiable and equally destructive force impends in this environment too and only a few moments later, nothing is left of it either. Stronger still, nothing will be left of all the things, all the bodies and all the universes that are yet to be formed. Until eventually, when at the end of the video the pupil/egg/planet explodes, there are no more avalanches to deafen us, no more transformations to be carried away by, and no more stars to see travelling through space. Of the vibrant night all trace is gone. The only thing that remains is utter darkness.

I am not the first to see that the confluence of gloom, dread, and the tropics is at the center of Rueda's work, and I am also not the first to see how a dark atmosphere of threat, supernatural events and destruction, that had mostly been associated with northern, Germanic territories and literary traditions, finds its way into the arts of the torrid zone.<sup>446</sup> In the last three decades, an increasing number of scholars and critics examined how a genre characterized by horror, darkness and mystery, more specifically the gothic genre, traversed geographical and artistic borders, crossed with local stories,

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<sup>445</sup> In geographical terms, the tropics refers to the zone located between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. It designates a considerable part of the Latin American continent: all of Central America and all of the Caribbean islands, the southern part of Mexico and the northern part of South America (including, of course, Colombia), as well as parts of Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Brazil. The tropics, however, came to signify much more than just a geographical zone. Literary scholar Juana Suárez stressed that: "the terms "tropics/tropical" are overused to refer to Latin America as a whole, encompassing discourses related to banana republics, abundance, leisure, and unruly worlds (both in the governance of the political and health orders), erasing the geopolitical diversity of the zone and differences in the histories of colonization, industrialization and the ebbs and flows of each country's particular participation in transnational and global transactions." Juana Suárez, "Tropical Gothic: Cinematic Dislocations of the Caribbean Imaginary in South West Colombia", *Studies in Gothic Fiction. Special Issue on Gothic in Latin America* 11, Issue 2 (2014): p. 36. In a similar vein, the literary scholars Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos write that: "traditionally, the tropical world has been synonymous with extravagance and excess; it resonates with sensuality and exoticism, while it is simultaneously riddled with diseases and lurking dangers." Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos, "Introduction: Tropicalizing Gothic", in *Tropical Gothic in Literature and Culture. The Americas*, eds. Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), p.4

<sup>446</sup> Multiple authors have stressed that Rueda's work belongs to the tradition of tropical gothic in Colombia. This becomes manifest, among others, in the articles: Fernando Cuevas Ulitzsch, "Desnudo de sangre de alas: reflexiones desde la obra de María Isabel Rueda", *Nómadas* 47, Universidad Central Colombia, (October 2017): pp. 189-199; Alfredo Baldovino Barrios, "El 'Gótico tropical' de María Isabel Rueda, *Arcadia*, 10 December 2015, accessed 4 December 2022, <https://www.semana.com/arte/articulo/arte-contemporaneo-maria-isabel-rueda-artista-cartagenera/45470/>; Santiago Rueda, "María Isabel Rueda, Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín—MAMM, *Art Nexus* 103, *Arte en Colombia* 149, Dec-Feb 2017, accessed 4 December 2022, <https://www.artnexus.com/es/magazines/article-magazine-artnexus/602299c1f565d22bd065d715/103/maria-isabel-rueda;Vampiros de la sábana, María Isabel Rueda, CARMA, accessed 4 December 2022, https://carmajournal.com/vampiros-de-la-sabana>

imaginaries, and memories, only to appear under new guises.<sup>447</sup> *Horror Vacui*, and Rueda's other black (and white) drawings and animations demonstrate to me that gothic—which after literary scholar Fred Botting I understand as being characterized by “gloomy and mysterious” atmospheres evoking “the disturbing return of pasts upon presents”, “emotions of terror and laughter”, “the sense of the unknown”, as well as “images of dark power and mystery” that offer a counternarrative to enlightenment modernity—penetrated the Latin American arts, and Rueda's work particularly, in profound ways too.<sup>448</sup> To that degree, I coincide with authors such as Fernando Cuevas Ulitzsch, Alfredo Baldovino Barrios, Kiki Mazzucchelli, Alejandro Martín, and José Roca, who also see Rueda's oeuvre as part of the tradition of tropical gothic in Colombia that is mostly associated with film directors Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina, and with writer Andrés Caicedo.<sup>449</sup>

In the fiery region between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, the genre that emerged in the dark and cold environment of northern, Germanic Europe, nestled, and in this region it *tropicalized* and transformed. This does not mean, as literary scholars Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos also stress, that it broke all ties with North Atlantic Gothic, but rather that it “problematized” and “altered” traditional forms and contents to suit the new location.<sup>450</sup> Besides transporting and adapting the typical gothic figures (such as vampires, monsters, demons, and

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<sup>447</sup> The edited book *Globalgothic* (2013) compiles a broad range of studies that examine how European Gothic made its way through the world, affecting and infecting local traditions. Likewise, it reveals the significant transformations gothic has undergone in places such as New Zealand, Thailand, Japan, and Hong Kong, and in media including literature, dance, television programs, film, music, and computer games. While the book does not foster an unambiguous definition of globalgothic, in its approximation to one literary scholar Fred Botting stresses that it “reflects the dark and shadowy contours of a new world order that is mediated, networked, militarised and corporatised but offers no clear-cut image of itself, flickering between a series of dissolutions and displacements.” Fred Botting and Justin D. Edwards, “Theorising Globalgothic”, in *Globalgothic*, ed. Glennis Byron (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 18.

<sup>448</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 1-6. It is worth mentioning that Rueda published a couple of fanzines that focused on the genre of Tropical Gothic, most particularly the magazines *Tropical Goth* (2006) and *Tropical God*.

<sup>449</sup> The seed of Latin American Gothic, or Tropical Gothic as it is also called, was planted by the Colombian author Álvaro Mutis after a conversation he held with Spanish-Mexican filmmaker Luis Buñuel. The story goes that during a late-night conversation, the former was expressing his desire to write a gothic novel in his homeland, to which the latter responded cynically, for he deemed it impossible to bring the horror genre to the American continent. Below the memories Mutis kept of the evening in which he shared his artistic desires with Buñuel, as expressed by the author himself: “I want to write a gothic novel but in *tierra caliente*, right in the tropics.” [...]. Buñuel replied that this wasn't possible, that it was a contradiction, since according to him the gothic novel had to take place in a gothic environment. I believe that evil exists everywhere; and what the gothic novel proposes is the character's transition through absolute evil.” (Carmen Bustillo, “Alvaro Mutis. Parodia y auto-parodia en <<La mansión de Araucaíma>>,” *Thesaurus* XLIX, no. 1 (1994), p. 143. [https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/thesaurus/pdf/49/TH\\_49\\_001\\_150\\_0.pdf](https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/thesaurus/pdf/49/TH_49_001_150_0.pdf)) Mutis neglected his colleague's comments and indeed created what is broadly considered as the first work of Tropical Gothic, *La Mansión de Araucaíma* (The manor of Araucaíma, 1973). Thirteen years later, the book was turned into a movie by the Colombian film director Carlos Mayolo and many other Latin American too, authors, filmmakers, and visual artists, followed in Mutis's footsteps.

Original text: Quiero hacer una novela gótica pero en tierra caliente, en pleno trópico"[...]. Buñuel me contestó que no se podía, que era una contradicción, ya que la novela gótica para él tendría que suceder en un ambiente gótico. Para mí el mal existe en todas partes; y la novela gótica lo que se propone es el tránsito de los personajes por el mal absoluto.

<sup>450</sup> Justin D. Edwards and Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos, “Introduction: Tropicalizing Gothic”, p.2

shapeshifters) to their new sociopolitical, cultural and climatological environment, as argued by cinema scholar Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez, and replacing the European ghosts for the ones of the “indigenous cultures that existed long before European invasion”, as argued by Edwards and Vasconcelos, gothic in Latin America incorporated the stories of violence and exploitation that have haunted the continent ever since the first colonizers reached its lands.<sup>451</sup> From presenting the history of colonization and slavery to evoking the more recent past of military dictatorship, guerilla and paramilitary warfare, and wars on drugs, Latin American gothic novels, short stories, films, videos, photographs and installations, encourage, as cinema scholar Enrique Ajuria Ibarra stresses, “a display of horror and secrets that lie hidden in the dense vegetation, heat and humidity of the tropical regions.”<sup>452</sup>

I end this last small chapter with a suggestion: by accentuating, on the one hand, that humans, nonhumans, and things are all connected to each other by a flow of living energy that runs through them, and suggesting, on the other hand, that sooner or later everything we sense and see will disappear due to the manifestation of an unidentifiable destructive force, *Horror Vacui* foregrounds the horror and secrets that the luminous and humid Latin American landscape carries within, and that so much typifies Tropical Gothic. From deep inside the sensual volcano some impalpable and disquieting histories seem to be bubbling up, creating a dark, gloomy, and supernatural atmosphere. In keeping with other gothic productions, reason does not serve us to find out what they are. Before we know it, everything explodes and all that has been before disappears, only to make place for a primordial and total darkness. By so being, both this artwork and this dissertation end just as they began, with nothing other than darkness; a black monochrome. Let me avoid any possibility for confusion, though: this darkness does not introduce an end in any form or shape. Rather it involves an alternative inception, an alternative perspective on the very significance and potentiality of darkness, that has started to materialize with this dissertation.

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<sup>451</sup> Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *The Migration and Politics of Monsters in Latin American Cinema* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), Edwards and Guardini Vasconcelos, “Introduction: Tropicalizing Gothic”, p.2

<sup>452</sup> Enrique Ajuria Ibarra, “Latin American Gothic”, in *Twenty-First-Century Gothic. An Edinburgh Companion*, eds. Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 267