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Dark matters: recasting darkness with contemporary Latin American Art

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The Accumulation of Sediments

When I think of the floor of the deep sea, the single, overwhelming fact that possesses my imagination is the accumulation of sediments. I always see the steady, unremitting, downward drift of materials from above, flake upon flake, layer upon layer — a drift that has continued for hundreds of millions of years, that will go on as long as there are seas and continents...the most stupendous ‘snowfall’ the earth has ever seen.⁴⁵³

We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of sediments. The poetics of duration (another leitmotif), one of the first principles of the sacred, founding books of community, reappears to take up the relay from the poetics of the moment. Lightning flashes are the shivers of one who desires or dreams of a totality that is impossible or yet to come; duration urges on those who attempt to live this totality, when dawn shows through the linked histories of peoples.⁴⁵⁴

In her 1951 survey about the oceans of our planet, Pennsylvania biologist Rachel Carson writes about the accumulation of sediments. This designation reverberates forty years later when Édouard Glissant shares his insights about the islands of the Antilles in his book *Poétique de la Relation* (1990). It is likely he did not know he was invoking Carson, probably had not even heard about the book that became in the United States an instant bestseller, and frankly it makes no difference. What moves me is that two persons, living miles apart, decades apart, in environments that are highly distinct, and operating in fields that share near to nothing, resort to the detrital matter deposited at the deep and dark ocean floor to learn from what was written there about, precisely those issues that inform their entire oeuvre: respectively, the earth and the Caribbean. For Carson the “volcanic dust, blown perhaps half-way around the earth in the upper atmosphere”, the “sands from coastal deserts”, the “gravel, pebbles, small boulders, and shells carried by icebergs and drift ice”, and the “fragments of iron, nickel, and other meteoric debris” that all fall to the sea and eventually sink to the bottom, as well as “the billions upon billions of tiny shells and skeletons, the limy or silicious remains of all the minute creatures that once lived in the upper waters” are “a sort of epic poem of the earth”.⁴⁵⁵ For Glissant, the accumulation of sediments is a metaphor in the midst of a reflection on the notion that runs through all his theoretical

⁴⁵³ Rachel L. Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p.75

⁴⁵⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 33

⁴⁵⁵ Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, p.75-76

work, *Relation*.⁴⁵⁶ While, as is usual in Glissant's writing, much remains—intentionally and suitably—unclear about this notion, we can enhance our understanding of what it means to him by looking, as he suggests, at “what took place” in the Caribbean.⁴⁵⁷ That is to say, by observing Creolization, a process Glissant described as: “the putting into contact of several cultures or at least several elements of distinct cultures, in a particular place in the world, resulting in something new, completely unpredictable in relation to the sum or the simple synthesis of these elements.”⁴⁵⁸

Like Carson and Glissant, I will in the final part of this dissertation dive deep into the sea that has thus far kept me near the shore, moving in between bigger and smaller waves, and I will assess the particles constituting the sediment. Only that in my reading, it are neither the sands, stones, or rocks, nor the minerals or metals, or the remains of plants and animals, that compose the sediment, but rather the insights about darkness that the discussed dark artworks from Latin America have awarded us. It are, to say it in other words, the insights that have been flowing around and in between the previous bigger and smaller chapters that denote the elements composing the sediment of this study. In the pages to come, I will accentuate the three main elements composing this sediment with the certainty Carson gave me that indeed “all is written here.”⁴⁵⁹ Even though my study has not been as ambitious as to allow me to see “reflected in the materials that compose” the sediment “all that has happened in the waters above them” and on the “surrounding lands”, I can see reflected in the sediments evoked here some of the particular appearances of darkness, as well as evidence of the actions it carried out, and I too can see parts of the successive layers that formed the modern project, the racism and colonialism that constituted it, and traces of darkness's eagerness to disrupt them.⁴⁶⁰

I hope for this sediment to be as fertile for future theoretical and artistic creations as the sediments addressed in Carson's work were for plant and animal life. And I hope for it to enrich the art field with nutrient to further examine the potential of darkness.

1. First element composing the sediment: darkness is matter

In the first pages of this dissertation, I spoke about how cosmological and biological dark matter constitute, respectively, the largest part of our universe and the vast majority of earth's soil. This would not have grasped my attention any more than for example the constataion that the ocean makes up most of our planet's surface, or that the human body consists of largely water, were it not for the remarkable fact that the main elements of both the sky and the soil are unobservable. They cannot be directly seen

⁴⁵⁶ Literary scholar Celia Britton, one of the main theorists of Glissant's work, awards a central role to *Relation* too in Glissant's writing. She affirms: “Glissant's theoretical work is a complex, ramified, proliferating, and constantly evolving body of ideas. But it is all underpinned by *la Relation*.” Celia Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory. Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 11

⁴⁵⁷ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 34

⁴⁵⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), p. 22

⁴⁵⁹ Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, p.75-76

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

(or heard, smelled, or touched), and they cannot be recreated in a laboratory. Even with the finest of telescopes, we are not able to get a direct view of the cosmological dark matter, and neither are we able to grasp just a little bit of dark biological matter and put it under a microscope. Yet in spite of our inability to directly observe these dark matters, and in spite of the fact that there is more we do not know than we do know about them, scientists are convinced that they are both capable of extraordinary things. That their potentials reach the edge of human imagination. The astronomical dark matter keeps our universe in place, being the substance “that holds the visible matter in galaxies — stars and gas — together.”⁴⁶¹ Its biological counterpart, the uncountable microbes in the deep subsurface, sequester atmospheric carbon and might therewith offer the solution for mitigating climate change.

I am bringing these types of dark matter back in because they are indicative of two issues that are essential for understanding what darkness has become in this dissertation. First, they open the way for the insight that what is designated as matter is not necessarily material, and that it does not even have to be observable, let alone graspable, in any direct way. This brings me to my second, equally important point, that matter is not just some passive substance diametrically opposed to life, but that it is capable of doing things as substantial as moving galaxies and absorbing and storing carbon dioxide. To the latter I will return when addressing the second element, the second insight about darkness, composing the sediment of this dissertation.

For now, a few more words about the former. The acknowledgment that matter is not necessarily or not openly material is foundational for the perspective on darkness I have foregrounded in this dissertation. In dialogue with artworks presenting a darkness as intangible and as vast as a room with no light (Meireles, Martiel) and as solid and humble as black ink on white paper (Ayón, Rueda), I have demonstrated that darkness comes in all shapes and sizes, and furthermore that in all its manifestations darkness is equally worthy of being designated as matter. The penumbra of a room proved to be just as dignified a matter as the black ink constituting a print, or the skin of an individual (Peña).

To conceive darkness as matter has implications for the ways in which we interact with the artworks composed of it. While in all of the artworks discussed in this dissertation, darkness can be seen, in many cases it also is as if it can be touched and felt. What seems still more noteworthy to me is that, sometimes, it can reach out to us too, send us a signal, and even envelop us. I have argued, for example, that in Meireles’s *Volátil* and Martiel’s *Penumbra*, darkness gets right under our skins, penetrates our bodies, and assimilates us into space. In Peña photographs and Ayón’s prints, we can move our fingers over the dark matter, feeling its ever-altering relief, texture, and volume, and sense how it either invites us to advance or forces us to withdraw. Touching *Man Made Materials* makes up for a gentle experience, at times. Some parts of Peña’s skin feel smooth and soft, and while we move through them, we feel as if we were tickled or caressed, and thereby, as if we were welcomed. Yet there are parts too where

⁴⁶¹ nasa.gov, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2018/dark-matter-goes-missing-in-oddball-galaxy>.

Peña's skin is rough and rigid, full of fissures and cracks, and where it is far from tender with us. When we touch those parts, we might feel a slight displeasure, a little irritation, as if the matter demands us to stop proceeding. The dark matter of Ayón's prints approaches us in a similar manner and generates comparable sensations too. While at times it treats us affectionately and blandishingly, there are other moments when this is all but the case. Moments when the darkness of Ayón's prints is rough and rugged, and when it seems to sting us, scratch us, or do whatever it can just to keep us at distance.

2. Second element composing the sediment: darkness has agency

Throughout this study, I have emphasized that darkness has the capacity to do things, substantial things even. Meireles's *Volátil*, Martiel's *Penumbra*, Peña's *Man Made Materials*, Watanabe's *Liminal*, Ayón's prints, and Rueda's *Horror Vacui*, they all demonstrate in proper and peculiar manners that something that regularly is not even accepted as matter, and as being deprived of any activity, aspiration, or target, is not at all so different from subjects of the human world. Through darkness flows a vitality, I argued drawing from the theory of Jane Bennet, a capacity "not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."⁴⁶² Yet, in addition to the trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of darkness, I have identified, and been attentive to, its desires and demands.

The diverse artworks discussed while moving in between the dissertation's waves, demonstrate that among the astounding abilities of darkness should be listed: its capacity to interrupt and disrupt luminous regimes; to dilute the boundaries between body and space and, thereby, question the notion of personhood; to, contrarily, outline the individual and accentuate its singularity, and, thereby, defy representation as well as the threat of being fixed into prefabricated interpretive models; to protect knowledges, sometimes even secret and sacred ones, and, thereby, resist the colonizer and its modes of understanding; to evoke universes that are suggestive of both, torrid and frigid zones, of radiant light and profound obscurity, and thereby display the dead and the dread that the dense and luxuriant landscapes of Latin America's tropical regions hide within.

3. Third element composing the sediment: darkness undermines the racist and colonial foundation of modernity

By accentuating the extraordinary capacities of darkness, the artworks in this dissertation dispute the constructed associations of darkness with evil, barbarity, and ignorance that, I argued, were vital to modernity. This means nothing less than that they contribute to subverting the image the West had drawn of itself, as enlightened and governed by reason, and thus, as opposed to the racially, intellectually, and morally dark non-West. Or, to put it in yet other words, they participate in the writing of a counter-

⁴⁶² Ibid., p. viii

narrative about darkness in itself, foregrounding, on the one hand, how it had become victim to racism and colonialism, and emphasizing, on the other, that it is in fact a vital matter that merits, and demands, being recognized for its forces instead of its flaws.

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Aligning the vital matter constituting the artworks examined in this dissertation with astronomical and biological dark matter, I have hinted at the tremendous confidence I place in the darkness that binds the aforementioned installation, performance, photographs, prints and videos to each other. Perhaps for some, my confidence has been too tremendous, but I do not believe I have been unrealistic. Darkness deserves to be recognized as the vital, resisting, disruptive, liberating, and thought-provoking matter it—hopefully—proved to be in this dissertation. In the company of astronomical and biological dark matter, the dark matter constituting the works by all artists, from Meireles to Rueda, might be intimidated, but there are no reasonable grounds for this. In its own fields, in art history, it has demonstrated to be capable of engendering things that are, relatively speaking, as significant as keeping galaxies in its place and mitigating climate change. Apart from the issues I have already mentioned when analyzing the sediment, I know that if only we give a chance to darkness, as I have done during my study, it can generate profound alterations regarding the manners in which art historians, and art researchers more generally, approach artworks. Specifically, it can upset ingrained models of analysis (grounded in representation), stimulate us to look at artworks not just with our eyes (but with the rest of our bodies too), open a path to touch and be touched by art (physically yet also mentally), and demand us to direct our attention to what we oftentimes did not know how to give words to or how engage with (and has therefore remained out of art historical and critical analyses).