

The Individual at the End of Time, and Paths Beyond

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ABSTRACT: Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*, a contemporary novel set in the Dominican Republic which follows the lives of multiple generations of women, constantly moves between and outside of borders, whether they be geopolitical, temporal, or in narrative form. Just as well, Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*, a speculative novel also set in the Dominican Republic, challenges borders through the story of its main protagonist and his struggles with spirits, queerness, and the politics of a dying world. Both novels utilize the environment as a grounding force that provides insight into the respective trials the characters face, both within the scope of the orishas' continued presence as both spirits and representatives of the land and water which informs much of the narratives, and the spatiotemporal politics of the Dominican Republic. Through the machinations of the spirits who guide the characters in both novels, and the consistent engagement with questions of family, queer lifeworlds, and time, Lara and Indiana demonstrate the interconnectedness of borders, environments, and time to varying ends. By providing narratives which begin to map out worlds beyond death, be they ends or beginnings, the authors contend with the violences of the past in ways that point to the potentialities of the future. What these futures look like, as *Tentacle* and *Erzulie's Skirt* tell us, ultimately rely on the limitations or unboundedness of our imaginations.

KEYWORDS: Rita Indiana, Ana-Maurine Lara, *Erzulie's Skirt*, *Tentacle*, Temporality

Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*, a contemporary novel set in the Dominican Republic which follows the lives of multiple generations of women, constantly moves between and outside of borders, whether they be geopolitical, temporal, or in narrative form. Just as well, Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*, a speculative novel also set in the Dominican Republic, challenges borders through the story of its main protagonist and his struggles with spirits, queerness, and the politics of a dying world. Both novels utilize the environment as a grounding force that provides insight into the respective trials the characters face, both within the scope of the orishas' continued presence as both spirits and representatives of the land and water which informs much of the narratives, and the spatiotemporal politics of the Dominican Republic. Through the machinations of the spirits who guide the characters in both novels, and the consistent engagement with questions of family, queer lifeworlds, and time, Lara and Indiana demonstrate the interconnectedness of borders, environments, and time to varying ends. By providing narratives which begin to map out worlds beyond death, be they ends or beginnings, the authors contend with the violences of the past in ways that point to the potentialities of the future. What these futures look like, as *Tentacle* and *Erzulie's Skirt* tell us, ultimately rely on the limitations or unboundedness of our imaginations.

In the beginning after the beginning, the orisha Erzulie appears to Chavel and states, "She will have a hard life, but she will find freedom" (12). This future, a time outside of the now and possibilities endless toward freedom, animates much of Ana-Maurine Lara's

Erzulie's Skirt and the lives contained within the book. In this same way, Giorgio, at the end of book and at the beginning of time within Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*, states, "He feels that someone very dear to him is dying and discovers tears in his eyes" (124). Whether at the beginning or the end, Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt* and Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* constantly engage with time, whether through the lens of its unboundedness or its cessation. In analyzing the ruptures, or reinscriptions, of linear time as they appear within the two texts, both Indiana and Lara provide a view into the possibilities, or finitudes, of lives lived beyond the scope of linearity. By tracking the instances where temporality informs the futures of the characters and the futurities imagined outside the pages of the books, this paper seeks to provide its own imagined horizon, where a book becomes a map toward that beyond.

Tentacle, a speculative fiction novel which introduces spiritual vehicles as conduits for time travel, places its protagonist in a future where environmental devastation has already occurred. *Erzulie's Skirt*, a contemporary novel that follows generations of women as they contend with life, family, love, and orishas, places its protagonists at their deaths. Both novels, located in the Dominican Republic yet covering a broad scale of times, histories, and futures, nevertheless bring forward these questions of the way time – whether linear or not – works to narrate both national and personal engagements with the environments and people around us. This notion of a beyond stems from Caribbean scholar and theorist Sylvia Wynter's delineation of what a beyond could look like, which she articulates

in the article, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument." Partially in conversation with Aimé Césaire's work on the natural sciences, she states:

The natural sciences (Césaire had argued in a talk given in Haiti, entitled "poetry and Knowledge") are, in spite of all their dazzling triumphs with respect to knowledge of the natural world, half-starved. They are half-starved because they remain incapable of giving us any knowledge of our uniquely human domain, and have had nothing to say to the urgent problems that beleaguer humankind. Only the elaboration of a new science, *beyond* the limits of the natural sciences (he then proposed), will offer us our last chance to avoid the large-scale dilemmas that we must now confront as a species. This would be a science in which the "study of the Word" – of our narratively inscribed, governing sociogenic principles, descriptive statement, or code of symbolic life/death, together with the overall symbolic, representational processes to which they give rise – will condition the "study of nature" (328, emphasis my own).

Wynter's conception of a beyond is specifically located in the narrative surrounding many of the conversations around ontological being, "Western Man" and the confines imposed on any articulation of a beyond that does not grapple with the language which defines it. The sort of narrative which Wynter describes, goes beyond the confines of one book or one narrative, and instead encompasses the language with which nations are bordered, time is made linear, and the natural sciences fail to give word to the structural failings which constitute environmental devastation. By posing these interventions as a *beyond*, Wynter allows for the consideration of a potential found in the Word as a future-oriented and future-making project. By positing "Western Man" as overrepresented within any articulation of the study of nature, Wynter opens the way for alternate considerations beyond that overrepresentation. The large-scale dilemmas that she describes, then, require both a reimagining of the governing principles which encapsulate the over-symbolic, as well as a serious consideration of the language which speaks it.

Un/Bordering the Spatiotemporal

The specters that haunt Giorgio and the coast of the Dominican Republic are Venezuela and China. *Tentacle's* framing of environmental destruction at the hands of China and Venezuela often reads as a condemnation of capitalism, and yet directs its focus on communist countries. Acilde's description of Said Bona as having "[a] voice like Balaguer's and face like Malcolm X" (76), immediately raises questions of the sort of parallels being drawn between fascism and com-

munist. With little regard to the differences between Balaguer's racism which characterized much of his tenure as president of the Dominican Republic and Malcolm X's revolutionary politics, here too we see a discomfiting inability on the part of *Tentacle's* characters to draw clear distinctions between problems of the state (or perhaps, more specifically, capitalism) to individuals who might otherwise embody politics that Giorgio ultimately fails to either differentiate or, in essence, win against. The anti-communism seen throughout *Tentacle* inevitably leads us back to the beginning (or ending) question of, where does the individual hero leave us when climate disaster is at our door? Giorgio leaves us nowhere but at that exact doorway. In framing the discussion of Giorgio, a potential savior, versus his antagonist, Said Bono, as the only possible timeline to imagine, there is no condemnation to be had, for this suspended future of individual against individual would always follow the linear time which capitalism dictates.

At the end of the book, and the beginning of the story, *Tentacle* offers us a view into time: "The victory odes Giorgio had been singing to himself came to a dead halt. He was terrified. The flashes from the disco ball made everything move in slow motion. Here was the person responsible for the deplorable state of the sea a few decades from now. Here was the reason for his initiation. All that for this" (121). *Tentacle*, a speculative tale of possible salvation through the powers of the spiritual, the mystic, and the temporal, all culminate in this one instance of deep reflection. Giorgio, at both the beginning and end of time, asks himself the question of whether saving his home from environmental catastrophe is worth self-sacrifice. He says, "He felt the intense pulse of his three lives at the same time and the weight of the sacrifice his little game was demanding of him now" (121). In the end, we are left with his decision: "He could sacrifice everything except this life" (125). Perhaps, in this ending at the beginning of time, the question to ask is not so much the price paid by an individual, as it is the question of the individual at all.

Regarding both the question of the individual, as well as the way a beyond requires a reimagining of the Word, Lorgia García-Peña articulates this need to both question and establish different narratives than previously imagined within a Dominican national narrative. She states, "Dominican blacks have continued to shatter the silences, questioning and challenging the racist norms that sustain the borders of dominicanidad at home and abroad. Producing an archive of *contradictions* that has begun to dismantle xenophobia and marginality within political, literary, and historical discourse as well as in the public sphere, *dominicanos* – particularly, I argue, those in the diaspora – place their racialized bodies at the center of history, *contradicting* Hispanophile ideologies that insist on erasing them" (57). García-Peña begins this process across multiple mediums throughout *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, a process which, I argue, continues within the pages of both *Tentacle* and *Erzulie's Skirt*. Just as much as the argument here lies in the futures imagined by the authors and characters, these processes of *beyond*, still grapple with that which came

before. The notion that a future is necessary, demanded, lies in the silences afforded by the crafted national narratives surrounding normative dominicanidad. Lara herself posits this intervention in relation to her poetry manuscript, *Kohnjehr Woman*: "Let us dare to be haunted. Let us awaken the specters of the sacred [Afro][Latinx][Queer] dead and make them present to our existence. Let them be healed. And let them guide us forward into all we have imagined and all we cannot" (13). Indeed, many of Lara's articles and writings are engaged with the way Black or Afro-descendant people are absent from the archive, and as such, require a reimagining of the archive in order to engage with Black life and lifeworlds. Lara's engagement with Afro-Caribbean religions throughout her works also reflects this same need to interrupt the violences of linear time. As she states in her meditations on Afro-Caribbean spirituality, "Within Vodoun, resurrections are the conceptual mapping of time and space onto material bodies for the reperformance of history, in the present, as the present... History is the present-future-past, and its enactment in the material realm reinscribes space with new possibilities and meanings" (348). By questioning these narratives inscribed within the archives, linearities, and narratives of the state and its attendant governing principles, the fictional novels examined here allow for the sort of contradiction that García-Peña delineates. For, as Yomaira Figueroa-Vasquez states in *Decolonizing Diasporas*, "Imagining worlds/otherwise entails engaging the apocalyptic, the ends of worlds birthed by the non-ethics of modernity, coloniality, and settler colonialism" (148).

Imagination as both tool for reinscription of linearity, and tool for its potential rupture, ultimately relies on the frame provided by the narrative engagement with temporality. In discussing speculative fiction as a sort of tool for imagination, we may look to Elizabeth Povinelli's *Economies of Abandonment*: "Not this makes a difference even if it does not immediately produce a propositional otherwise" (191, emphasis my own). Here too we might consider Anindita Banerjee's article "Fiction," where she queries, "What happens to the *what if*, as the indigenous author and critic Grace Dillon reminds us, when for the majority of the planet the apocalyptic future has not just arrived a while ago but is here to stay for the long term: within, without, around, and across what used to be neatly divided in literary studies into our selves, our texts, and our world" (188)? Although *Tentacle's* inability to reckon with timelines beyond the individual proves a hard site to craft an answer to the question posed by Banerjee, perhaps we may look to the negation of an answer instead, as Povinelli suggests. If the individual has failed, we are required to look beyond the one. Capitalism's temporal investment in ensuring that all that was, is, and will be, are inevitable – a concept that Kara Keeling calls "Capital's predictable futures" (xi) – effectively disallows any form of imaginative conception outside of that circular loop. By reinforcing the idea of the individual "losing" at the hands of forces greater than one, despite the questions raised about attributing environmental disaster in the Caribbean or Latin America not to capitalist nations in the global north but to communist coun-

tries, *Tentacle* nevertheless allows for the notion that world-making is impossible at the individual scale.

If a *not this* is necessary in this project of imagination, looking to an otherwise outside the linear temporality to nowhere provides an avenue outside of impending catastrophe. In the beginning, or perhaps the end, of *Erzulie's Skirt* by Ana-Maurine Lara, the orishas Agwe and Erzulie tell us a story. This story makes up the bulk of the novel, and as such, leads us to question where we are located temporally. Just as Erzulie makes us believe that the story that she will tell Agwe has already occurred, the only other temporal signifier is the subsequent title, "Now." Much like in *Tentacle*, the temporal dislocations, ruptures, and interruptions are all possible through the presence and intercession of the orishas in the lives of the novels' characters. *Erzulie's Skirt* continues the temporal dislocation into the first chapter of the book – we start at the end. Despite Erzulie framing the telling of this story as one that has happened and therefore will be told linearly in her time with Agwe, we start with the main characters' deaths. As the woman, presumably Erzulie, who brings the news to Miriam that Micaela has died states: "Micaela has left. She has asked me to fetch you" (7). Miriam responds: "We lived so much, Micaela. Is it true you have asked for me?" (7). This end at the beginning, only possible through the oral conveyance offered by Erzulie to Agwe, ruptures any sort of temporal situatedness that orients the reader toward a linear temporality. This rupture is continuously reinscribed throughout *Erzulie's Skirt*, whether in the form of memories, metanarrative recipes, chapters titled "Now" which begin not now, or the end of the book that in all actuality, offers us a beginning. In a stark departure from the impending, and seemingly inevitable end that *Tentacle* provides, *Erzulie's Skirt* rests comfortably in the rupture of a bordered linearity, and beyond death, gives us the possibility for more.

Futures Beyond

The sort of potentialities that are offered within *Erzulie's Skirt* are constantly reiterated not just through the narrative, but in the metanarrative established by Lara within the novel. The final page of the novel and Yealidá's position as the bearer of Miriam and Micaela's lessons allows for a beginning at the end. As stated, "Miriam and Micaela had shown her in their final moment, had shown her with every story that had graced her ear and every medicine they had taught her. They had shown her how to walk, how to breathe and how to believe" (242). The past participle ("had shown her") brings to mind the memories that are central to this final conversation; however, there is the ability to imagine a beyond. Just as they had shown her how to walk, she will continue walking; just as they had shown her how to breathe and believe, she will carry those lessons into the future beyond that final sentence. Lara's inclusion at the beginning of every chapter, "Recetas para los vivos," not only suggests the temporal – who, at that moment, is alive? – but also

the fictional/spatial, continuing this idea presented through Yealidad that the possibilities found within the book through ruptured time, includes those beyond its pages. If we are to imagine that the living includes us, the readers, then we can also begin to imagine the time after the last punctuation mark. In comparing *Tentacle* and *Erzulie's Skirt* the idea of the *beyond* is one that is central not only to the beginning endings, but the ending beginnings, respectively. In the questions of temporal possibilities, futurities, the ability to imagine that beyond becomes central to the idea of an engagement with the temporal within the confines of the books.

Kara Keeling, in the preface of *Queer Times, Black Futures* gets to the heart of this question of horizon: "We become or we are unbecoming... When something happens differently than it has before, when something affects us, we reforge ourselves in response. Every *now* harbors chaos and, therefore, a capacity for change. When survival is posed as enduring *as such*, we miss how that task calls for its own undoing in time. None of us survives as such; indeed, perhaps, freedom requires we give way to other things. Now. And perhaps again" (ix). The backwards and forwards motion of Keeling's "we become or we are unbecoming" is a dynamic one. *Erzulie's Skirt's* continuous engagement with policing forces within and outside the Dominican Republic highlights the precarity of being Black and queer within the hegemonic structures at large, Miriam and Micaela's insistence on their shared living, their survivance and love outside state forces which would otherwise separate them, and their continued presence beside Yealidad and her life beyond their deaths, the notion of becoming, now and again and again, points toward a horizon that, in its dynamism, allow for the possibilities of

a beyond. In contrast, the possibilities that could have provided a horizon, or a continued dynamic change in order to actualize those possibilities, for Giorgio and every other person within *Tentacle* affected by his choices are ultimately left finite exactly because of the static adherence to linearity. His "becoming" is not a litany for survival, as Keeling's reference to Audre Lorde suggests, it is instead an end.

In closing her chapter "Apocalypse," Figueroa-Vasquez states, "Decolonial love as future work envisaged though our pasts is necessarily a technology for social transformation, and is a method through which we can reimagine human ontogeny and sociogeny... It can be imagined as looking into the 'vast and insoluble' sea to make visible what was disappeared, and make futurities beyond coloniality perceptible" (179). Future work, as she states, is an act of temporal disruption. It is an act of reckoning with the past, the violences of its linearity, and imagining a future beyond the confines of capitalist time's borderings. Just as Figueroa-Vasquez draws the connection of the water and the sea to these new imaginaries, the horizon beyond what we have seen can also work to inform the work that goes into that sort of decolonial love. In offering us a way to articulate a *not this* as *Tentacle* does, and the imperative to take the lessons beyond the confines of a book as seen in *Erzulie's Skirt*, both Rita Indiana and Ana-Maurine Lara offer potentialities and horizons outside of the times we have been confined to. Just as the characters of the book give us a way to imagine the ends or beginnings of time, the novels allow us to begin the project of writing our own narratives and future potentialities.

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