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Wifredo Lam, the Shango Priestess, and the *Femme Cheval*

By Paula Sato¹

Abstract

This article examines Afro-Cuban painter Wifredo Lam and his iconic construction of Afro-Cuban identity. From the vantage point of a literary scholar rather than art historian, and in keeping with Lam's description of his paintings as "poetry," I read his artwork as terse lines of verse, rich in metaphors. Although Lam is regarded as the painter of Negritude, commonly understood as a male-centered movement, he distinguishes himself from his contemporaries by incorporating in his brand of Negritude two female figures as metaphors of the power to decolonize the mind. One of those figures is his Afro-Cuban godmother, Mantonica Wilson. Healer, diviner, and priestess of Shango, she is memorialized by a description of her attributed to Lam and by the poem titled "Mantonica Wilson" that appear in Aimé Césaire's poetry collection *moi, laminaire*. . . . She is also memorialized in Lam's 1941 and later paintings, whose metaphoric references to an Afro-Cuban spirituality attest to her enduring influence on the visionary world that the artist created. Her presence is most notably sensed in the figure of the *femme cheval* or horse-headed woman that appears repeatedly in Lam's paintings. Valerie Fletcher notes that "in Santeria symbology a horse signifies the possession or *empowerment* of a devotee by an *orisha*; when a practitioner becomes possessed, that person is described as being 'ridden' by that spirit" (my emphasis). The expression of an anti-colonial spiritual force, largely associated with his godmother and the *femme cheval*, is one of the defining features of Lam's Negritude.

Keywords: Negritude, Santeria, primitivism, femme cheval

Introduction

When we ponder the Negritude movement in the Caribbean, we generally think in masculine terms. In 1987 Aimé Césaire did much to reinforce the movement's perception as exclusively masculine when in his "Discours sur la Négritude" he named Léon Gontran Damas, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and himself as its founders. Césaire then expanded his all-male genealogy of Negritude to include Alioune Diop, followed by African-American men of the Harlem Renaissance—Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Sterling Brown—whom he credited with birthing "the first Negritude," and by Richard Wright (2013a: 1589). As Césaire

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describes it, Negritude was the revolt of black men against the assassination of their culture, an amputation that had begun during slavery and continued in its aftermath, and whose effect essentially was to “couper l’homme de lui-même” (“cut man off from himself”); Negritude was also the quest of those men to recover their lost selves that remained buried in “l’inconscient collectif” (“the collective unconscious”) (2013a: 1589-90, my translation). Moreover, often presented as seminal texts of Negritude literature in academic courses, Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939) and Damas’s “Hoquet” (1937) offer a poetic viewpoint that is decidedly male-centered. In Césaire’s *Cahier*, a male poet persona identifies with male victims of racist oppression and he enjoins a “bitter brotherhood” to bind his “black vibration” to the “navel of the earth” (2013c: 21, 57). In Damas’s “Hoquet” the poet persona is a mulatto boy who seeks to reconnect with a Black culture and history that his mulatto mother, expressing the values of the white colonizer, disparages and prohibits in her home.² It is only in the new millennium that scholar T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and writer Daniel Maximin have focused their attention on the influence of women such as Jane Nardal, Paulette Nardal, and Suzanne Césaire on the Negritude movement’s birth and early expression.³ What remains absent from Negritude scholarship is the contribution of Afro-Chinese-Cuban painter Wifredo Lam—said to be the painter of Negritude—to the movement with regard to gender. The present article explores Lam’s valorization of female figures, and in particular the Santeria priestess and the *femme cheval* or horse-headed woman, not only as protectors and disseminators of Afro-Cuban culture, but also as models of empowerment over and against their white exploiters and colonizers.

The Shango Priestess

Wifredo Lam was born in 1902, the year of Cuba’s independence, to a Chinese father and a mulatto mother, in the north-central Cuban town of Sagua la Grande. His father was a shopkeeper, respected among the Chinese in the community as an educated man who spoke several Chinese dialects and acted as the public scribe. In his biography of Wilfredo Lam, based on extensive interviews with the artist, Max-Pol Fouchet informs us that Lam’s father was also artistic; and he “used to copy the thoughts of Confucius or Lao Tse, in exquisite calligraphy, on colored papers which he hung on the walls of his room” (Fouchet 11). While Lam might have inherited his artistic nature from his father, he owed much of the contents of his imagination to his godmother. Mantonica Wilson was a Santeria prophetess and priestess; and she introduced Lam to the spirit world of Santeria, the Afro-Cuban religion descended from beliefs that the Yoruba-speaking peoples of southwestern Nigeria and parts of Benin and Togo had brought with them to Cuba on slave ships. Wilson was also a healer of widespread reputation whom people would travel for miles to consult and ask for a cure, which she would provide after calling upon Shango, her tutelary *orisha* or ancestral guardian spirit (Fouchet 14). Wilson was a powerful figure; and as Fouchet notes, we see in a photograph taken in 1900 that her “face reflects an air of extraordinary authority and energy” (14). Her spiritual energy is also reflected in the following description, which Césaire attributed to Lam, and which serves as a preface to the section devoted to Lam in

² In her quest to transform her son into a good Frenchman, the mother ignores his queries about the disastrous history of Caribbean slavery and forbids him to play the banjo, considered to be an instrument for blacks. He is to attend violin lessons, speak “French French,” learn proper table manners, and continually keep his body in check. However, his involuntary reflexes, such as his desire to hear about the “disaster,” persist like a hiccup that cannot be cured.

³ See Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 2002 and Maximin, *The Great Camouflage: Suzanne Césaire, Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*, 2012.

Césaires poetry collection *moi, laminaire . . .* (first published in 1982). The description of Wilson, together with a poem representing an imaginary conversation with the Shango priestess, became the sole tribute to a woman in the poetry collection:

Mantonica Wilson, my godmother, had the power to conjure the elements . . . I visited her in her house filled with African idols. She made me the gift of the protection of all these gods: of Yemanja, goddess of the sea, of Shango, god of war and companion of Ogun-Ferraille, god of metal who gilded the sun every morning, always at the side of Olorun, the absolute god of creation. (Césaire 1990: 207)

As A. James Arnold surmises, the quote is most likely “le condensé de conversations entre Césaire et Lam sur son enfance” (“a summary of conversations between Césaire and Lam about his childhood”) (1622, my translation). Césaire further expressed in his poem “conversation with Mantonica Wilson” that Lam’s godmother had “life to transmit” and “strength to distribute” to a “stream of caterpillars,” that is, to Afro-Cubans who would be transformed by the decolonization of their mind through the priestess’s cocoon of life-giving transmissions and strength-giving distributions, and who would emerge liberated from their humble crawling to the freedom of flight (1990: 213). Lam, who himself associated his godmother with the *ashé* or sacred power of Shango, the bellicose Santeria god of fire and lighting, evoked that sacred power in numerous paintings, metaphorically and with poetic license, through flashes of lightning, red and white (the colors of Shango), and sharp spines protruding from his figures like weapons of warfare. Thus, Wilson’s role as wielder and communicator of Afro-Caribbean culture and spiritual power should have established long ago our perception of her as a vigorous force of Negritude. However, perhaps because Césaire characterized Negritude as the quest of black “men” to recover their culture, and perhaps because little has been written on Césaire’s *moi, laminaire . . .* in which she appears, Mantonica Wilson has been largely ignored in Negritude studies. Moreover, examination of Lam as a Negritude painter tends to focus on his longstanding friendship with Césaire and on their mutual use of a modernist, surrealist idiom in their critique of colonization rather than on Lam’s representations of women as figures of Negritude. Exceptionally, Fouchet did see Afro-Cubanness as appearing in two guises to Lam: in a male ancestor nicknamed *Mano Cortada* (*Chopped Hand*), whom Lam associated with physical revolt, and in his godmother who bore “witness to the possible presence of the invisible” (13, 15). As Fouchet notes, it was thanks to his godmother that the surrounding gardens, forests, and rivers for Lam became peopled by invisible beings.⁴

Lam’s anti-colonial modernism

If during his childhood Mantonica Wilson filled Lam’s imagination with spiritual beings from Santeria and Afro-Cuban lore, when Lam was an adult he filled his canvasses with creatures largely of his own invention, for example the *femme cheval* or horse-headed woman that adorns numerous works—especially those produced after his return to Cuba in 1941—and that ranges in

⁴ Fouchet, mistakenly referring to Mantonica Wilson as a sorceress, writes: “Thanks to his *madrina* [or godmother], Wifredo entered a world peopled by invisible beings. In the gardens, for instance, dwelt those mysterious twins, the *Ibúi*. And one had always to beware of the *Cicirikus*, little sprites with very sharp, pointed teeth. ‘Don’t go down to swim in the river,’ the sorceress would tell him. ‘It’s the home of the *Guje*. If they catch you, they’ll carry you away with them’” (14).

aspect from effeminate to Amazonian, and from seductive to regal. Lam painted his horse-headed women in a modernist Cubist, Surrealist, and primitivist mode that cannot be fully understood without first mentioning Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), originally titled *Le Bordel d'Avignon* (*The Brothel of Avignon*), a painting that was influenced by Paul Gauguin, whose so-called "primitivism" can be characterized by a pre-renaissance flatness of perspective, a childlike simplicity of forms and boldness of outlines, a rejection of European standards of beauty, and an attempt to reconnect with a pure state of nature.⁵ Gauguin perpetuated in his paintings the exotic myth of Tahiti as an island paradise of abundant fruit and innocent sexual license where the local women offered themselves up freely to western male desire, a myth that had been introduced by Louis Antoine de Bougainville in his description of his voyage to Tahiti in the 1760s and that had been further fueled by Pierre Loti in his novel *The Marriage of Loti* set in the Polynesian islands and published in 1880.⁶ Elizabeth Childs suggests that the myth originated with a bloody massacre of hundreds of Tahitians by the British navigator Samuel Wallis in 1767, after which the Tahitians presented their teenage girls as peace offerings not only to Wallis's men, but also to Bougainville's who arrived shortly thereafter (34-36).⁷ As if to counter the exotic myth of the docile and sexually available colonized young women that we see in Gauguin's paintings, Picasso incorporated into the drapes that surround his female figures a series of Cezanne-inspired flat planes resembling shards of glass, the sharp angles of which are echoed in the angles of his figures' breasts and elbows. As a consequence, while they beckon the male onlooker with their poses, the figures simultaneously repel him with the threat of castration. Lam must have seen something that he admired in Picasso's *Demoiselles* because he reiterated elements of the painting in his own masterpiece of modern art *The Jungle* (completed in 1943). In both Lam's painting and Picasso's, a figure on the left is seen in profile and stands next to a figure with a raised elbow. A central figure gazes boldly at the onlooker giving the impression that it is the onlooker who has become the object of contemplation or study, and thus, of the colonizing gaze. In the lower right of Lam's painting, we see the back side of a figure with a rotund buttocks, which Lam once likened to a prostitute, and which recalls the figure in the lower right of Picasso's painting who has also turned her back towards the onlooker. In both paintings, a masked figure in the upper right is seen in semi-profile. However, Lam's figure brandishes not shards of glass but scissors, the significance of which he described as follows: "In *The Jungle* the revenge of a small Caribbean country, Cuba, against the colonizers is plotted. I used the scissors as a symbol of a necessary cut against foreign imposition in Cuba, against all colonization" (cited in Mahabir 17).

By "foreign imposition" and "all colonization" Lam was referring largely to U.S. intervention on the island. As I have written elsewhere, the U.S. had tried to impose its racist policies on the island as it occupied Cuba militarily from 1899 to 1902; it had gone on to set up a government of occupation from 1906 to 1909; and it "would continue to hold considerable sway over Cuban affairs until the Cuban Revolution in 1959—to the extent that Eric Williams maintained that by the 1920s, Cuba had become 'in every sense of the term an American colony'" (Williams 464, in Sato 26). Lam had left for Europe in 1923, at the age of twenty-one, because he

⁵ Gauguin himself had been inspired by medieval stained-glass windows, Breton folk art, and the Japanese prints that had made their way to Europe in the nineteenth century.

⁶ See Elizabeth Childs's *Vanishing Paradise* (2013) and Peter Brooks's "Gauguin's Tahitian Body" (1992). See also Jean-François Staszak's "Primitivism and the Other" (2004) and "Voyage et circulation des images" (2006).

⁷ The dispute between the Tahitians and Wallis was apparently provoked by the violation by Wallis's men of local customs surrounding the gathering of drinking water (Childs 34).

had felt that as an artist of color he had no future in Cuba.⁸ He was just beginning to make a name for himself in Paris when the German occupation during World War II forced him to flee France and return to his island of birth in 1941. Upon seeing Cuba again for the first time in almost eighteen years, Lam was appalled to find that blacks were living in the same conditions of poverty, discrimination, and exploitation as when he had left. Fouchet records him as saying, “If you want to know my first impression when I returned to Havana, it was one of terrible sadness The whole colonial drama of my youth seemed to be reborn in me” (30). In this way, his experience resembled that of the poet persona in Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939) who was similarly disheartened by the condition of his people upon his return to his native land. Incidentally, shortly before arriving in Cuba, Lam had spent time in Martinique where he had met Césaire, who had read him excerpts of his *Cahier*. Helena (Holtzer) Benítez, Lam’s partner at the time, describes the encounter as a meeting of kindred spirits: “Troubled and moved,” Lam admired Césaire’s “poetic observations and descriptions of life as a black man in an environment of white dominance. He had at last found a companion soul” (56). Also shocked by what he called the “tourist frivolity” on his island and its consequent degradation of Cubans of African descent, Lam conveyed the following to Fouchet:

Havana at that time was a land of pleasure, of sugary music, rumbas, mambos and so forth. The Negroes were considered *picturesque* As for mulatto women, they were much sought after and as often as not became prostitutes. When Fidel Castro came to power, there were over 60,000 [prostitutes] in Havana alone What I saw on my return was like some sort of hell. For me, trafficking in the dignity of a people is just that: hell.” (Fouchet 30)

Fouchet writes that from then on every image that Lam painted “became an exorcism,” a denunciation of and battle against that hell of degradation (30). However, Lam himself described his motivations as an artist in Cuba as follows:

I decided that my painting would never be the equivalent of that pseudo-Cuban music for nightclubs. I refused to paint cha-cha-cha. I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the Negro spirit, the

⁸ To give the reader an idea of the racist climate in which Lam was raised, as Cuban historian Alejandro de la Fuente notes, although Cuban schools had been desegregated since the early years of the republic resulting in a high literacy rate among Afro-Cubans, the latter were mostly relegated to menial jobs and remained underrepresented in the professions (Fuente 14, 149-53). Moreover, although Afro-Cuban men had been given the right to vote in 1901, they remained grossly underrepresented in the Cuban government because political parties allowed very few Afro-Cuban nominees to appear on their ballots (Fuente 12, 23, 54, 65). Afro-Cubans responded in 1908 by forming their own political party, basing its legitimacy on the fact that the Independence Army had been eighty-five percent Afro-Cuban. However, perceiving the party as racist and anti-Cuban, the Senate passed the 1910 Morúa bill that prohibited the formation of any political party “composed of a single race or color” (Fuente 72). Violence broke out in 1912 when Blacks, who were peacefully protesting the Morúa law, were accused in headline news of being “a horde of savages” bent on race war—accusations that panicked the white population and sparked a spree of racist terror and indiscriminate killing (Fuente, 72-73, 75). Joy Mahabir reports the number of massacred Afro-Cubans as over six thousand (13). And Lam, who was nine at the time, must have been particularly traumatized by the violence when a city park in Sagua la Grande became a “battlefield” with many wounded (Fuente 78). Afro-Cuban professionals, for their part, fearing that public display of Afro-Cuban cultural forms would reinforce the link that whites had made between blackness and barbarism, condemned Santería and other Afro-Cuban cultural expressions and “called upon blacks to de-Africanize themselves” (Fuente 155).

beauty of the plastic art of the blacks. In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters. (in Fouchet 31)

In order to “act as a Trojan horse,” Lam needed to ensure that his art would find its way into the museums of the exploiters. He therefore incorporated into his paintings elements of Cubism, such as flat planes and fragmented bodies, and Surrealism, such as fantastical, hybrid creatures and unconventionally-located body parts, as well as elements of the “primitivism” that had been in vogue in Western Europe since Gauguin’s posthumous exhibitions in Paris in 1903 and 1906 (Mosquera 130). As Claude Cernuschi puts it, “Lam packaged his [art] in the modernist language that was all the rage in Western Europe, thereby guaranteeing that [it] would find its way, surreptitiously into the fortress of Western civilization” (62). And Lam’s *Jungle* (1943) adorned the lobby of New York’s Museum of Modern Art for many years.

The European primitivism that was all the rage in Parisian avant-garde circles when Lam began making a name for himself in Paris in the late 1930s had been inspired in part by the African, Oceanic, and Ancient American art works that began arriving in Europe following colonial conquests and expeditions in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These objects had been put on display in museums in the major western European cities, such as the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris; and they could also be found in European curio shops and flea markets (Murrell, Sherman 31, Samaltanos 4, 18-19). Niru Ratman informs us that these art forms were labeled “primitive” and that European artists projected onto them attributes such as “simplicity” and “a more instinctive nature,” qualities that they then began imitating in their own works of art. By doing so, they felt they could breathe new life into a sterile and moribund European culture. However, those same artists continued to consider the cultural productions of non-Westerners as artifacts rather than artworks, and they “left unchallenged derogatory views about non-western people, such as their supposed simplicity and less civilized societies” (Ratman 160, see also Edwards 9 and Sherman 8). Lam’s reaction to non-western art, however, was very different from that of his European contemporaries. In the words of Fouchet, “The great mistake of western civilization, in Lam’s eyes, was to have separated, in accordance with exaggerated and arbitrary notions of quality, the so-called primitive arts from those of supposedly mature civilizations” (18). And Fouchet notes Lam’s reaction to prehistoric art forms that the artist had seen in Madrid’s Archaeological Museum in the 1920s and 1930s as follows:

For him those specimens of prehistoric or archaic art—a piece of carved flint, an unpolished sacred stone and, especially, cave paintings and Magdalenian figurines—were the irrefutable proof that artistic creation corresponds to an affirmation of man’s dignity in the face of all that tends to dominate him, whether it be nature or his masters. Despite its diversity of periods and races, such creation is based on constants of form and spirit. (Fouchet 18)

Lam’s observation, as paraphrased by Fouchet, that “artistic creation corresponds to an affirmation of man’s dignity in the face of all that tends to dominate him” speaks volumes about Lam’s own artistic motivations and impulses. In Paris in 1938 Lam began painting prolifically in what could be called a primitivist idiom—setting brown, often nude figures, made of bold outlines and simple geometric shapes, in flat perspectives. However, he was already beginning to formulate a counter message to that of painters such as Gauguin. Absent from Gauguin’s Tahitian works is the

recollection of the bloody massacres that accompanied early encounters between Europeans and Polynesians and the ruthless suppression by the French of armed Polynesian resistance in the 1840s, in 1880, and again at the end of the nineteenth century (Childs 34, 43). By contrast, pensive, grieving, and tormented, Lam's figures from his Parisian period (1938-1940) express the horror and anguish of colonization and offer a critique of its violence.⁹

After fleeing Paris and before returning to the Caribbean, Lam spent time in Marseille with Surrealists such as André Breton as he and they, along with other artists and intellectuals on the Nazis' list of undesirables, awaited passage out of Europe; and the fanciful creatures that appear in Lam's subsequent Cuban paintings are evidence of the influence of the Surrealists on his work (Sims 28). However, he also continued to paint in an idiosyncratic primitivist idiom, which he contrasted with the primitivism of another painter, Le Douanier Rousseau, in these words: "Le Douanier Rousseau, you know, painted the jungle, in *The Dream, The Hungry Lion, The Apes*, with huge flowers and serpents. He was a magnificent painter, but not the same kind of painter as I am. He does not condemn what happens in the jungle. I do" (Fouchet 32). In other words, although both artists painted in a primitivist mode, Lam's paintings expressed his condemnation of colonization whereas Rousseau's did not.

Later, Lam's primitivist idiom differed from that of his contemporaries in yet another important way. In a letter to Helena (Holtzer) Benítez dated 1946, Lam criticized Europeans for turning African and Oceanic works of art into pieces of exotica and sterile museum curiosities and for thereby trafficking in non-Western peoples' dreams, the dreams that had gone into creating those works of art, dreams that those people had already lost because they had been stolen from them through colonization.¹⁰ Thus, although Lam must have admired the strength of the limbs and gazes in Picasso's *Demaiselles*, for he mimics their poses in *The Jungle*, he must have also deplored the removal of art forms such as African masks from the contexts that gave them their meaning and hence the de-contextualization of those masks that we see in Picasso's painting. In his *Jungle* Lam placed those masks back where they belonged, which for him was in the Afro-Cuban religious ceremony.¹¹ The disembodied head in the lower left of Lam's painting appears to be that of Elegua—the *orisha* or deity in charge of guarding and opening the door to the spirit world, who is always present at Santeria ceremonies, and who is often represented in Cuba as a bodiless head. Scattered on the jungle floor, cowrie shells indicate that an *orisha* has been consulted and has sent a message back. As for the horse-headed figure on the left, in Santeria,

⁹ Unbeknownst to Lam, Aimé Césaire, who was also in Paris in 1938, had composed the following lines of his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* between 1935 and 1938 that express a similar counter-message to Gauguin's:

So much blood in my memory! In my memory there are lagoons. They are covered in death's-heads. They are not covered with water lilies. In my memory there are lagoons. No women's loin-cloths spread out on their shores. My memory is encircled with blood. My memory has a belt of corpses! (2013c, 23, stanza 40).

¹⁰ Lam's letter, written while he was visiting France, reads as follows: "My personality, whether I would want it or not, is not European . . . I feel phony here, as some exotic thing (branded, if you like) as some Negro or Oceanic statue from the Pacific, from wherever, but whose transplanted existence here becomes sterile, a museum curiosity. . . . Yesterday, it was black skin that was sold; today it is its spirits, its dreams, that are exploited, like objects of curiosity These peoples have already lost their dreams because these dreams have been removed from their mindset" (cited in Cernuschi 25 and in Leenhardt 180).

¹¹ For example, the visage in the upper right of both Picasso's *Demaiselles* and Lam's *Jungle* appears to be modeled after a Bobo-Fing mask from the Etoumbi region of the Republic of Congo. See "Une source d'inspiration inépuisable: les Arts premiers," Bibliothèque municipale des Essarts-le-Roi, vendredi 6 avril 2012, <http://bmlesessartsleroi.blogspot.ru/2012/04/une-source-dinspiration-inepuisable-les.html?m=1> (last visited 10 April 2016).

when a devotee becomes possessed by an *orisha*, she or he is referred to as that *orisha's caballo* or “horse”; thus, the figure’s horse’s head shows, metaphorically, that she or he is being possessed—or “ridden,” in Santeria terminology—by an *orisha* (Fletcher 1992: 183). Given the fact that Cuba’s secretary of the interior had banned all Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies in 1922 on the grounds that they were barbaric and that they allegedly led to crimes against “children of the white race” (Fuente 50-1), Lam’s incorporation of Santeria iconography in his art was an important part of his Negritude—his desire to valorize Afro-Cuban cultural elements that were in danger of amputation. When Lam returned to Cuba in 1941, Afro-Cuban religions were still largely associated with demon worship and *brujería* or witchcraft by white elites and Afro-Cuban professionals (Fuente 154-5). It was through paintings such as *The Jungle* that Lam helped to elevate the status of Afro-Cuban cultural forms such as Santeria. As Cernuschi notes, “by celebrating [Afro-Cuban] belief systems in their work,” Cuban intellectuals, such as Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera, and Wifredo Lam in his art, “began . . . awarding them . . . the higher status of religion rather than the lower one of magic. In the process, the field of Afro-Cuban studies, not to mention the worship practices of the Afro-Cubans themselves, gained greater legitimacy” (Cernuschi 44). We should add to Cernuschi’s list the Afro-Cuban writer and scholar Rómulo Lachatañeré who was another important “pioneer of Afro-Cuban studies” (Castellanos vii). However, as noted above, the spirit of the blacks that Lam wanted to express was not only the spirit of Santeria, but also the spirit of affirmation of human dignity in the face of dominating forces, whether they be forces of nature or man.

The *femme cheval*

One of the clearest examples of Lam’s idiosyncratic, anti-colonial modernism is the *femme cheval* or horse-headed woman that figures prominently in his Cuban paintings and that counters Gauguin’s representations of the domesticatable racial, feminine Other. Indeed, it was through his iconic figure of the horse-headed woman that Lam used the modernist idioms of Cubism, Surrealism, and primitivism to affirm the dignity of Afro-Cuban women and to oppose the myth, propagated by Bougainville and reiterated by Loti and Gauguin, of exotic colonized women as existing to fulfill the sexual desires of the western male. As mentioned above, Lam’s self-stated intention for his Cuban paintings was to “disturb the dreams of the exploiters,” which for him were largely Americans who had turned Havana into a brothel (Fletcher 2007: 57); and although Lam sometimes referred to the figures in his Cuban paintings as “monsters” (Fouchet 30), much more than that, they were expressions of feminine dignity and revolt in the face of degradation. Similar to Lam’s godmother, Mantonica Wilson, the figure in Lam’s painting *I Am* (1949) has a proud, regal bearing. The red that completely surrounds the figure, one of the colors of Shango, suggests that she too is a priestess of Shango who has the power to conjure the elements. Elegua, who sits atop the figure’s head, challenges the onlooker’s gaze by gazing back from his own small, disembodied head as he guards and opens the door to the spiritual world of Santeria. However, the figure’s flowing green hair beckons the onlooker as it evokes both Oshun, the soft and inviting goddess of love and waterfalls as well as Mantonica Wilson, who had the power to soothe and to heal. The figure’s iconic horse’s head signals that she is being “ridden,” or empowered, by Shango. However, the spike protruding from her back is a warning that she will not be “ridden”—that is, tamed or dominated—by men. Her testicles in place of a chin are metaphoric of her *huevos* or courage and daring; and they are another sign that she will challenge those attempting to dominate or exploit her. Moreover, the double-edged blade that she carries, threatens castration if one gets

too close; and Lam further evokes the threat of castration through the subtle placement of a faint penis-shaped appendage near the blade.

Several elements of the painting *I Am* also suggest that the work is a portrait of Cuba herself. The combined shape of Elegua's round head and the figure's long hair gives the impression that she is wearing a mantilla—such as are found in portraits that Lam had painted as a source of income in Madrid—and is an indication she is Spanish speaking. In addition, the calligraphy that adorns the top of her sleeve, which is based not on pictograms and ideographs incised on jade and oracular bones, as Chinese calligraphy originally was, but is based on Cuban cane stalks, flowers, and fruit, makes the image a syncretic blend of the Chinese and the Cuban and serves as a reminder of the once large Chinese presence in Cuba in comparison to the other Caribbean islands.¹² Finally, the red and white that figure prominently in the painting, as well as being the colors of Shango, are the colors of his Cuban avatar, the Santa Barbara of Catholicism, which had been Cuba's largest officially-recognized religion for centuries. All of these elements combine to make the *femme cheval* in the painting *I Am* a syncretic image of Cuba herself—a Cuba strong and defiant not only in the face of foreign domination but also in the face of forces in Cuba that would try to denigrate and amputate her Afro-Cuban culture.

Conclusion

We see in the painting *I Am* that Lam's Negritude was wedded to the preservation of the Afro-Cuban spirituality that he associated with Santeria, and at a time when the Cuban government, the white elites, and the middle class were criminalizing and attempting to eradicate Afro-Cuban cultural expressions. However, we also see that Lam's Negritude was wedded to a feminist revolt against the sexual exploitation of Afro-Cuban women by the western male colonizer. It was these socio-artistic engagements that led Lam to distinguish himself from his contemporaries by incorporating in his brand of Negritude two female figures not only as vital actors in the conservation, dissemination, and valorization of Afro-Cuban culture, but also as metaphors of the power to resist colonization. One of those figures was his Afro-Cuban godmother, Mantonica Wilson. Healer, diviner, and priestess of Shango, she is memorialized in a description of her attributed to Lam in Césaire's *moi, laminaire . . .* and in Lam's Cuban paintings, whose metaphoric references to Santeria attest to her enduring influence on the visionary world that the artist created. The second of those figures is the *femme cheval* or horse-headed woman, in which we also sense the presence of Lam's godmother, and which appears in a number of Lam's Cuban works. Inasmuch as his artistic works are representations of the drama of the Afro-Cuban life that he aspired to paint, they are also an indication of how central the spiritual force of the Shango priestess and the *femme cheval* were to his construction of that drama.

¹² The number of Chinese landing in Cuba between 1847 and 1873 is recorded in the *Report of the British Consulate General* in Havana, September 1, 1873 as 121,810 (Yun 20). By contrast, between 1838 and 1918, the British West Indies (British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica) received approximately eighteen thousand Chinese; and in the 1860s the French Caribbean received about one thousand (Look Lai 4-5).

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