

**The White Darkness:
Confluences in the Imaginative Explorations of Identity and ‘the Other’ in
the Work of Three Jewish Woman Artists in the Tropics - Maya Deren
(1917 - 1961) in Haiti, Clarice Lispector (1920 - 1977) in Brazil, and Hélène
Cixous (1937 -) in Algeria.**

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(To start with an aside: The Cairns Institute’s stated strategic intent of ‘creating a brighter future for life in the tropics worldwide’ would seem to suggest that at present the tropics are too dark...!)

In this paper I will make use of extensive quotes to demonstrate the striking and surprising similarities in the writing of these three artists as they try to express what is ultimately inexpressible – their deepest experiences of life.

A White Darkness, its whiteness a glory and its darkness, terror...I am sucked down and exploded upward at once. (Deren: 259)

This is how Maya Deren described her experience of possession in a Haitian Voudoun ceremony.



Maya Deren, film still *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943. <http://lostcityproducts.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/deren-1.jpg>

Clarice Lispector writes:

A dark hour, perhaps the darkest, in broad day, preceded this thing I don't even want to try to define. In the middle of the day it is night...I am...searching...for a joy so great that it would become razor sharp, a joy which would put me in touch with an intensity resembling the intensity of pain. (Lispector 1989: 'Such Gentleness' 160 - 161)



Clarice Lispector, <http://img.listal.com/image/183952/600full-clarice-lispector.jpg>

Hélène Cixous:

She is taught that hers is the dark region...Because you are black, your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous...Don't go into the forest...
The 'Dark continent' is neither dark nor unexplorable: It is still unexplored only because we have been made to believe that it was too dark to be explored. Because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent. (Cixous, Clément 1986: 68)



Hélène Cixous, [http://www.ballade.no/nmi.nsf/pic/cixoushelene02/\\$file/cixoushelene02.jpg](http://www.ballade.no/nmi.nsf/pic/cixoushelene02/$file/cixoushelene02.jpg)

But what interests us is, in fact, the ‘Dark continent’, the tropics.

As soon as I arrive in the tropics, the ease I feel is related to a diminished need to insulate myself from the environment. I find I’m able to be more porous, permeable to this place of extremes in dynamic equilibrium, where opposites tenuously balance, where night and day are the same length, a place of constant birth and death, luxury and poverty, paradise or hell. A place of paradox, where contradictions coexist.

The original Greek word ‘paradoxon’ means unbelievable. *Doxa*, meaning belief and *para* meaning ‘side by side’, as in ‘parallel’, two lines that never meet, or meet only at infinity.

Side by side: the artist and the ‘other’. Immigrant histories provide Deren, Lispector, and Cixous with a deep awareness of the ‘other’ and a rich source for personal explorations of paradox. A strong motivation for their art is a search for belonging or a way of dealing with not belonging.

Hélène Cixous was born in Algeria (and I have to admit, the part of Algeria she lived in is north of the tropic, but she has spent extended periods in tropical India and Cambodia doing research for plays set there.) Her mother was a German refugee but her father’s family had

been in North Africa for centuries. They were deprived of French citizenship under the anti-semitic Vichy administration during WWII. Where she belongs is:

Neither France, nor Germany, nor Algeria. No regrets. It is good fortune. Freedom, an inconvenient, intolerable freedom, a freedom that obliges one to let go, to rise above, to beat one's wings. To weave a flying carpet. *I felt perfectly at home, nowhere.* (Cixous 1998: 155)

Cixous writes that from the age of three she was aware that:

the world is divided in half...I see that there are those who...die of hunger, misery and despair, and that there are offenders who die of wealth and pride,...who walk around in a stolen country...without seeing that the others are alive. Already I know all about the 'reality' that supports History's progress: what menaces my-own-good is the 'other'. What is the 'Other'? If it is truly the 'other', there is nothing to say, it escapes me. But in History what is called 'other' is an alterity that does settle down and Society trots along reducing a 'person' to a 'nobody'...The paradox of otherness is that it is not tolerated as such, but reappropriated, recaptured, and destroyed. (Cixous, Clément 1986: 70)

Later, she went to a school that was predominantly white and French. She says:

I could obviously not not see what there was to see, those big holes, or black spots, those gaping rips in the dress in place of the Jews and the Muslims, making it incumbent upon me to take up a critical space considerably larger than my dreamy inner space... (Cixous 2006: 70)

Cixous, painfully conscious of the fate of members of her family who died in concentration camps, sides with 'History's condemned, the exiled, colonised and burned.' But she believes:

If there is somewhere else which can escape the infernal repetition, then it is there that new worlds are written, dreamed, invented. (Prenowitz: 25)

and so she writes, extremely prolifically, including many plays, which since 1985 have been produced by the world-renowned *Theatre de Soleil* (who, at the 2005 Melbourne festival, performed a sell-out season of *Le Dernier Caravanserail*, an epic refugee Odyssey, partly set in an Australian detention centre).

She writes:

He who goes to the Theatre grants himself the ephemeral right to hear those who are deprived of speech in the city speak: children, poets, the dead, animals, thoughts at the back of our mind, outcasts, the homeless. In that, in this giving of speech, the poetic Theatre is political. (33)

She is also founder of first Women's Studies department in Europe (at the University of Paris VIII, where she is Emeritus Professor). She describes the 'otherness' of women's writing as 'Neither black on white nor white on black...' (Cixous, Clément 1986: 88). 'She writes with white ink.' (93)

Both Clarice Lispector and Maya Deren were born in Ukraine. Escaping Jewish persecution, they were young children when their families arrived in the Americas. The Lispectors first settled in the economically deprived North-East of Brazil and later moved to Rio. Deren mainly lived in New York, but here I'm interested in her work in Haiti.

Lispector's awareness of 'otherness' began even younger than Cixous and was somehow innate:

I am certain that right from the cradle my first desire was to belong...I must have somehow felt that I did not belong to anything or anyone...Perhaps I started writing so early in life because, at least by writing, I belonged to myself to some extent. (Lispector 1992: 'Belonging' 148)

Lispector, regarded as one of the most important Brazilian writers of last century (and greatly admired by Cixous), admits to belonging to Brazil. But, as this excerpt continues, paradox does not fail to appear:

Life has allowed me to belong now and then, as if to give me the measure of what I'm losing by not belonging. And then I discovered that: *to belong is to live*. I experienced it with the thirst of someone in the desert who avidly drinks the last drops of water from a flask. And then my thirst returns and I find myself walking that same desert. (149)

Deren, one of the most influential avant-garde American film makers, writes of her feelings of not belonging:

the peculiar and isolated position of the artist in Occidental culture might arise from the fact that he, alone among professionals, does not – by definition – accept certain beliefs which have so long been the premises of Occidental thought. Is it not worth considering that reverence for ‘detachment’...might be primarily a projection of the notion of a dualism between spirit and matter,...the belief that physical, sensory – hence, sensual! – experience is at least a lower form, if not a profane one, of human activity?...Is it valid to use this means to truth in examining Oriental or African cultures which are not based on such a dualism and are, on the contrary, predicated on the notion that truth can be apprehended only when every cell of the brain and body – the totality of the human being – is engaged in that pursuit? (Deren: 9)

Deren went to Haiti, intending gather material for a dance film she was creating. There she became freshly aware of a situation to which I had grown inured and oblivious: that in a modern industrial culture, the artists constitute, in fact, an ‘ethnic group’, subject to the full ‘native’ treatment. We too are exhibited as touristic curiosities on Monday, extolled as culture on Tuesday, denounced as immoral and unsanitary on Wednesday, reinstated for scientific study Thursday, feasted for some obscurely stylish reason Friday, forgotten Saturday, revisited as picturesque Sunday. (7 – 8)

Ironically, her feeling of not belonging as an artist in a modern industrial society led to an intense feeling of belonging among the Haitians.

My own ordeal as an ‘artist-native’ in an industrial culture made it impossible for me to be guilty of similar effronteries towards the Haitian peasants...this discretion seemed, to the Haitians, so unique that they early formed the conviction that I was not a foreigner at all, but a prodigal native daughter finally returned. (8)

Such a strong sense of belonging led to her conceding defeat as an individual artist. A keen dancer, she instead became an active participant in the ceremonies, becoming possessed by Haitian gods, the loa, on a number of occasions.

Possession...is the centre toward which all the roads of Voudoun converge. (247) The loa, ‘mounts’ a person...The metaphor is drawn from a horse and his rider and the actions and events which result are the expression of the will of the rider. (29)

Here an extreme other, a god, displaces the devotee's soul, turning his body into the 'other' of animal. I find it fascinating that both Lispector and Cixous also use the metaphor of a horse when describing their creative work.

Lispector:

...I would have wished to have been born a horse...that great symbol of free life...Does the horse represent the beautiful and free animality of human beings?...The horse tells me what I am... (Lispector 1989: 'Dry Point of Horses' 107)

Cixous:

Then, when I'm in the middle of a trip of writing, and I dream, very often the dreams are a kind of engine or...horses, it gives me energy, power, they push me very strongly along my way, immediately from the night's work to the day's work. (Sellars: 119)

(And speaking of horses, the day of delivering this talk being Melbourne Cup Day, this morning I was remembering being at the Cup, and relishing the feeling of witnessing a mass possession fuelled by alcohol and...horses.)

Here Deren describes her experience of possession by Erzulie, the Goddess of Love:

As sometimes in dreams, so here I can observe myself, can note with pleasure how the full hem of my white skirt plays with the rhythms...I realise, like a shaft of terror struck though me, that it is no longer myself whom I watch. Yet it *is* myself, for as that terror strikes, we two are made one again...Now there is only terror. 'This is it!'...I feel a strange numbness enter...from the earth itself...I say numbness, but that is inaccurate. To be precise, I must say what, even to me, is pure recollection, but not otherwise conceivable: I must call it a white darkness, its whiteness a glory and its darkness, terror...I am sucked down and exploded upward at once. That is all. (Deren: 258 – 260)

And she has no more consciousness of herself during the period of possession, which is terrifying because it entails a loss of self, but at the same time, glorious, because one becomes a god. The paradox of finding oneself (one's god, one's truth) by losing oneself.

Lispector writes:

Communicating with another human being through the written word is wonderful... Writing turns human beings into gods. (Lispector 1992: 'Farewell, I am on my way!' 127)

and Cixous believes:

A woman, by opening up, is open to being 'possessed'... She comes out of herself to go to the other,... to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be. (Cixous, Clément, 1986: 86)

In her role as playwright, she says:

The theatre is more, always more. It is what the Greeks called enthusiasm, possession by the gods... It is only possible to enter the theatre *without self*. (Prenowitz: 5)

Here she describes the experience of writing a play about Phoolan Devi, the Indian Bandit Queen:

I entered into a passiveness,... an emptiness,... in which I let this character I did not know enter... And because I had to be in a state of trance I wrote it without stopping, I think in a single day... I had to undergo such a tension of substitution – in order to let myself be replaced... by someone entirely foreign – that at the end of this experience... of possession, I fainted,... I lost myself. (3)

For Lispector, new insights appear not through the altered state of trance but through intuition. She says:

I have never *chosen* my language. All I have ever done was follow my own intuition without knowing where it will lead me... Despite the risks involved, I only enjoy writing as long as I do not know what is going to happen next. (Lispector 1992: 'The "True" Novel' 400)

And one can feel her doing just that in these excerpts, where she plays with the transcendental pull between light and dark:

And what does one do in that sitting-room with the light switched on? One thinks of bright darkness. No, no, one does not think. One feels... Will I read? Never. Will I write? Never. ('Accursed and Blissful Insomnia' 93)

But if I put on my white dress and go out... I shall be lost in the light... as I take a slow leap

onto another plane. And how shall I find spring in this absence of mine? Rosa, iron the darkest of my black dresses. ('Spring Sonata in Switzerland' 55)

Particularly, she yearns to experience the 'state of grace'. In the following story, she expresses something which, like Deren's 'white darkness', is impossible to express logically – the way being strung between two opposing and mutually exclusive poles can lead to truth.

I was strolling down the Avenida Copacabana,...thinking of nothing in particular...Little by little I began to realise that I was perceiving things, ...deeply satisfied with what I saw. Just then, I experienced a feeling which I had never heard of before. Out of sheer affection, I felt myself to be the mother of God, the mother of...all that exists...Being the Mother of the World released my love. Just at that moment I stepped on a dead rat. I bristled immediately with the terror of being alive; in a second I felt shattered by fear and panic...Shivering from head to foot, I somehow managed to go on living...I tried to sever the connection between the two facts...But it was useless...What was God trying to tell me?...God's cruelty wounded and outraged me...All I could think of was revenge...This time I shall not be silenced, I shall reveal what He has done to me... Who knows...perhaps it was because...I foolishly believed that by adding up points of understanding I was expressing my love. I failed to recognise that it is only by adding up misunderstanding that one comes to love...And because deep down I want to love what I would choose to love rather than what there is to love...For I shall only be able to be the mother of all things when I can pick up the dead rat in my hand...So long as I imagine that *God* is good simply because I am evil, I shall find myself loving nothing...As long as I go on inventing God, He will never exist. ('Forgiving God' 406 – 409)

Paradoxically, Lispector's piercing insights come from continually pushing language to where it fails:

Reality is the raw material, language the way I seek it - and how I don't find it. But it is from seeking and not finding that what I have not known is born, and I instantly recognise it. Language is my human endeavour. I have fatefully to go seeking and fatefully I return with empty hands. But – I return with the unsayable. The unsayable can be given me only through the failure of my language. Only when the constructs falter do I reach what it could not accomplish. (Lispector 1988: 170)

Failure is the incentive to go beyond, to achieve what is impossible, expanding oneself to embrace reality, to reach the point at infinity where two parallel lines do meet, where paradox is transcended.

Failure is also important in the writing of Cixous:

...things that I cannot write about. They're so terrifying, they're so painful, that I fail. I try, I fail. I try again, I fail. And I know that where I fail is where work will eventually emerge, I don't know when and maybe it won't ever, but it's there. (Sellars: 120)

Failure is what drove the genesis of a book she never expected to write about the country of her birth. There are striking parallels with Deren's description of possession.

One night she woke with 'unrestrained joy' to write what the 'Comer', a god, dictated to her. It started with the paradoxical line:

The whole time I was living in Algeria I would dream of one day arriving in Algeria... (Cixous 2006: 9)

The next morning, she's excited to continue working on the writing, but can only find the first paragraph of the five pages she had written. She searches madly for hours, swinging from 'hope to mad despair'. Then:

around 11am there was an unexplicable heavenly phenomenon: the sky grew totally black, and night fell. Perhaps, I started to tell myself, during the thick of noon which could hardly have been more realistic and nonetheless never-before-seen, it is not a weird and inauspicious occurrence. But quite the contrary. It is incredibly like that sort of *Algerian disorder* I used to get in Algeria or that Algeria got to me, that feeling of being possessed by a feeling of dispossession and the response I produced to this, that struggle to vanquish the unfindable that can lead to self-destruction...With an excruciating effort I dragged myself away from this scene of being sucked up. Not knowing how, I made myself in two. And I put my own madness into my own work. By some kind of magic I faced myself in the other direction. (9 – 12)

And she wrote the book.

It was Deren's failure to make the work of art she'd planned that led to her possession by Erzulie. In Voudoun, Erzulie is identified with the Virgin Mary, an innocent and suffering mother of god. Deren's description of Erzulie's world echoes Lispector's experience on the Avenida Copacabana.

Erzulie moves in an atmosphere of infinite luxury...in which all anxieties vanish...Yet...no sooner is she pleased with such promise than she moves toward...perfection. In the midst of the gaiety she will inexplicably recall...some old, minor disappointment. She will remark the one inadequate detail...Suddenly it is apparent that imperceptibly she has crossed an invisible threshold...and, in another moment, she, who seemed so very...real, is suddenly of another world...dark despair surfaces and engulfs her beyond succor...she who is Goddess of Love protests that she is not loved enough. Inevitably...she begins to weep...it would seem that nothing in this world would ever, *could ever*, answer those tears... (Deren: 139 – 143)

and again, this failure is deeply significant:

The wound of Erzulie is perpetual: she is the dream impaled eternally upon the cosmic crossroads where the world of men and the world of divinity meet, and it is through her pierced heart that 'man ascends and the gods descend.' (145)

Cixous:

In a secret way even a bad end is always at the same time a beginning of a consolation. (Prenowitz: 33)

In a tropical rainforest the canopy trees utilize most of the sunlight and soil nutrients to fuel their growth. But when one falls, the gaping hole is soon filled by the species of many young plants, some who'd been hibernating, waiting for their chance to access the limited resources. A tropical example of destruction leading to new growth.

In this paper I have explored paradox in the work of three artists in the tropics. As visitor or immigrants, they are all, to differing extents, the 'other' within their environment. Their failure to belong led to extraordinary experiences of being transported, taken over, controlled, entered. Paradoxically, it is where they fail and where they are most fully 'other', that, transcending dualism, their strongest artistic experiences occur. For Deren there is the failure to make the film she intended, and the existential grief of an Erzulie possession. For Cixous,

what she is too fearful to write about is where her work emerges. Lispector, whose writing is replete with paradox, explicitly grapples with language in her endeavour to say the unsayable. I'll finish with a quote from her:

...I was hoping to give up writing...I wanted to remain silent. For there are things I have never written and I shall take them with me to the grave...There is a great silence inside me. And that silence has been the source of my words. And silence has given me the most precious thing of all: silence itself. (Lispector 1992: 'Anonymity' 103)

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