Hotel No Tell:

Cross-Conceptual Decoloniality

Isabel Stub

New York University, Global Liberal Studies

This thesis has been submitted on this day of April 17, 2016 in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for the NYU Global Liberal Studies Bachelor of Arts degree.
Abstract:

*Hotel No Tell* is a multimedia art piece comprised of short prose and stop-motion film. I utilize semiotician Walter Mignolo’s theory on the polarity concerning modernity and coloniality, respectively the institutionalized imperialist narrative that celebrates the achievements of the West while downplaying its own aggressions versus the underlying logic of the pervasive and ever present ways constitutive colonialisms have shaped history. Decolonial thinking is an effort to understand in order to overcome coloniality underneath the rhetoric of modernity. In art, decolonial thinking has been disseminated through a variety of mediums to create the counter narrative.

*Hotel No Tell* is thus a project that spans across technique and medium in the interest of: 1) examining conceptual habits we form in the subconscious, 2) questioning the validity of linear narrative, and 3) upsetting the colonial matrix of power concerning the autonomy of the female body. My interpreted facets of decolonial thinking serve as reactions to systemic violence, both in the realm of the physical and the ideological. Through mindful appropriation, I create a dialogue between Latin American Magical Realism and European Dada and Surrealism to at once substantiate established decolonial artforms and to hybridize these forms to create a modernized cross-conceptual work that is distinctly personal and unique in temporality.
Acknowledgements:

I would sincerely like to thank the entirety of the Global Liberal Studies program and staff for the guidance and opportunities that have developed my intellectual and artistic expression both in New York and abroad, and for allowing me to limitlessly pursue my interests in an indispensably stimulating, cross-curricular environment. I would particularly like to thank Professor Amy Wilkinson, my thesis advisor, for her ceaseless insight, endless patience, and relentless wit. Without her, this thesis would not exist. I would also like to extend my appreciation to Professor Robert Fitterman; his work, profound creativity, and natural capacity to inspire catalyzed my growth as an artist and an observer.

I am deeply and perpetually grateful to my parents, Sandi and Jake, for their wisdom, love, and boundless support; I owe them my education and my identity, the reason I create. I would like to thank my sister, Aleda, for inspiring me always and believing in me when I cannot. And lastly, I’m grateful to Sarah Hombach and Colt Kozal, my creative partners and dearest friends.
# Table of Contents:

**Hotel No Tell (Short Prose)**

- Chapter 1: The Attic...........................................4
- Chapter 2: Room 307..........................................8
- Chapter 3: Across the Street.................................12
- Chapter 4: Room 204..........................................14
- Chapter 5: The Basement.....................................21

**Hotel No Tell (Film): Link and Stills**.................................25

**Process Document: Cross-Conceptual Decoloniality**

- Part I : Introduction and Pre-Production..........................28
- Part II : Magical Realism as Counter-Narrative.....................30
  - i. The Axolotl as Identity Crisis: Julio Cortazar..................33
- Part III : DADA as Disruption, Surrealism as Ellipses..................40
  - i. The Appropriation of the Savage: Jean Arp and Marcel Janco........42
  - ii. Opposing Bourgeois Nationalism: Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia....44
  - iii. Cutting Through Industrial Smog: Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann....48
- Part IV : Fulfilling My Manifesto.....................................52

**Works Cited**........................................................................55
Hotel No Tell

Chapter 1:
The Attic

Jackhammers titillated the basement floor. My fleshy walls pulsed with the bed as I fished out an eye booger. Morning was still night and the yellow darkness of the just-before-light drenched my arms; I reached for my cigs and the matchbox, which was unhealthily light. I remembered that I used the rest of the matches to light candles so I could work on the plans at my desk last night. I don’t trust lightbulbs, they’re too consistent. Fire light makes anything amorphous, which is what you want to ensure you’re eating something whole, every corner, for those airtight, no-room-for-failure kind of plans. It’s probably hard to make mistakes when you’re a bird, that kind of view.

Outside my window was the backlit sleepscape, neighbors alone, coupled, or tripled dozed behind their curtains, behind tall narrow windows, fat windows, windows with conspicuous bars, all crafted for the voyeur, hovering over the cafes and the pharmacy and the butcher’s corner mart and the butcher’s husband’s flower shop and the smallest dog park in the world that can only fit one dog at a time. I would usually be able to stare at it all, at them, with a cig and too-hot tea on the sill, but everything was ruined because I’m not one to keep stock of pleasures. I forgot to grab tea from the kitchen for the second day in a row and I already told you about the matches. I changed into my uniform, which is as flesh colored as the walls, a sort of sick caucasian that was meant to be peach. Small black buttons lace their
way up the right side, nearly military style, while the pants faint around my legs. I stuck the
cig behind my ear as day enthusiastically groped for the horizon’s rung.

I lifted the trapdoor, my foot found the ladder. I used to jump down, but I’ve been
paranoid about the condition of my ankles after I witnessed a neighbor snap one of hers like
a splintered toothpick during a vigorous exercise instruction video; she was apparently old
and brittle, but I’ve seen her open at least thirty pickle jars first hand and she cooked
everything in lard so you could assume her joints were well lubricated. Anyway, her heart
couldn’t take the fall and now a very slender insomniac eats mostly soup there. I climbed
down the ladder without issue and took the stairs six flights down, spiraling, under flickering
sticky light, pink. I entered the lobby and covertly zoomed to Jeremiah’s desk with desperate
nonchalance.

“Where are the matches, Jerry?”

“Good morning. I put them away,” he craned his neck from one side to the other, a
performance, looking behind me.

“You never put them away.”

“Yeah, but the thing is, Charles has been taking too many and it’s bugging me all over.
Man, I’m talking one lollipop per goddamn patient. That’s all I’m saying and all I’m saying is
this too, he’s in nonsmoking room,” he spoke like runny yolk on high heat, slippery, solid.
His convictions were as strong as his full head of hair, clinging resolutely despite his age and
those gray, sporadic eyebrows. Though he was opposed to poetic waxings in theory, his
artistry still manifested in the death defying narration of his own life, every movement an
advance of a chess piece, matchbox gluttony, the villain, the hero; with his youthful locks he
forces the snake to eat its tail. I don’t think he will ever die. His body is angular, but his physical severity is balanced by a marshmellow smile that emerges in the exact moments you’re about to take him seriously.

“We have nonsmoking rooms?”

“Well, his room doesn’t have an ashtray anyway,” he picked at his finger nail for a second. “You need some?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok, well if Charles asks, we ran out,” he fished under the desk and produced a whiskey-colored glass bowl filled to the brim with matchboxes; “Hotel No Tell” was printed on them in a bejeweled grandmother kind of font, two stars stained top; the aesthetic meant to counter our reputation.

“Why would he ask me?” I lit a match, its engine revved and combusted.

“Oh, you know, if it comes up, that’s all I’m saying,” he toasted his teeth on a campfire, glinting.

“So, they started with the pool. Any idea when it’ll be finished?” I asked.

“What pool?” he looked behind me.

“The basement pool.” Just then, the jackhammers started up again.

“Oh, that pool. Yeah, the pool pool. Boss hasn’t said yet. Man, makes me forget about silence, makes me forget to breath! All I’m saying is no one’s swimming where the sun don’t touch unless they’re dead.”

“What?” It was too loud.
“And it’s just the regulars today! Should be easy pie! May be the right time to wash 204’s duvet!” he handed me the skeleton key.

“See you later” I went around the left of the desk and headed back toward the kitchen’s double doors. The fluorescent lights startled me like every morning. I assume they were hand-me-downs from some foreclosed insane asylum because they induce a post-lobotomy visual affectation to which I will never adjust. Like the kitchen of a presbyterian church, everything was eggshell colored, except the metallic winking of stovetops and hanging utensils, which clanged together, earthquake style. Above the utensils, the jars of pickled onions and pickled beets and the canned blackberries from the blackberry bushes on the perimeter vibrated to the jackhammer’s boogie. The jackhammer stopped suddenly and for a millisecond, timespace had its fabric caught on a thorn and absolute astro stillness graced the world, a glitch. Then a blackberry jar fell and smashed on the ground.

I exhaled and exited the kitchen toward the basement, ashing in a tray balanced on the blotchy leather armchair in the lobby. Jeremiah’s head was lowered as he scribbled on something. When I reached the basement door, to grab for the handle and turn it became an absurd notion, frightening. I’m cautious because so many are not, and I’ve seen how turning handles on closed doors can go awry. Mr. and Mrs. Bobblehead in the apartment across the way still might be able to speak to each other if everyone had stayed on their own sides of the door, respecting the threshold. I decided to head for the supply closet on the first floor instead. Seems like I’m always busiest before 7 a.m.

With my cart and my cleaning supplies back in the kitchen, I popped a slice of bread in the toaster and waited, surveying the broken jar and blackberry preserves, the sludge’s
topography, the unlikely camaraderie between the glass shards and the bulbous fermentation of bush fruits. I should make note of this, it could prove useful for the plans. The toast sprang, I smeared the least glass infested portion of the floor jam on it and kept it in my teeth as I cleaned the mess. Nothing sparkles in Hotel No Tell, no matter how vigorously I clean. It’s frustrating only because everything hints as if it used to sparkle at some point, either before I was born or in someone’s dream. I’m neither diligent, nor lackadaisical as a housekeeper. It all gets done anyhow, gracefully or otherwise. Lady Grenadine, my boss, can’t complain, but she can’t necessarily commend me either, not that she’s ever around. And we always have a fair amount of vacancy, so I’m not pressed for time, except Jeremiah expects me to wash 204’s duvet so perhaps I should get a move on.

Chapter 2:

Room 307

“Charles! It’s me,” I knocked.

“Come in!” he sounded pained. The door was locked so I jiggled the handle. After seconds of stillness, I reached in my pocket for the skeleton key. I pushed the door open and I saw Charles sitting at the desk in 7 different places and myself at least 9 times over. Charles is a mirror salesman; he must have been cleaning his wares because mirrors covered most of the walls and the bed and even the floor aside from a strategic pathway from the door to the desk to the bathroom.

“Should I leave my cart in the hall or--”
“Quickly, get over here,” he said without looking at me. I left my cart and weaved through the prism of eternity that Charles had deftly and inadvertently crafted. It was dizzying to an extent, but comforting because that I have always assumed heaven to look like this. He continued, still glaring at the paper in front of him, “I need you to read this.” He looked up, “Or should I read it aloud? Would it be better in my voice or in your head? Hold on,” he closed his eyes, “Ok, just read it and be candid, you know, how you are with them. My disposition is not as delicate at my profession.” I noticed a pile of matchboxes on the top right corner of the desk, next to 4 candles; one was lit, the others caved, the weight of their wax spilled forth on the wood, the lava having cooled. Burnt matches lay lost.

“You’re about the candles, too. Bird’s eye view, am I right?” I gestured to the conglomeration.

“What?” he was becoming agitated, gesticulating as if he were sweating, but he was always dry; I don’t think he can physically cry, but the blue veins on his translucent bald head always become more prominent whenever I think he’s emoting.

“Nevermind. I’ll take care of that,” I nodded at the spill.

“Oh, the candles, yes, just like the Greats, all by candlelight, yes. No need to worry, I don’t care, I’ll clean it myself later. Now, please have a look at--”

“Need more toiletries?” I asked.

“Shampoo, yes. Conditioner, no. But please! High stakes, high stakes, my friend.”

I don’t like reading Charles poetry, not that it’s particularly bad, but for some reason he has deluded himself into thinking my opinion holds truth because I edit the hotel newsletter. He lost God during his divorce, but he still examines his tea leaves. I assume his
wife or husband was never honest with their opinion of his poems, or particularly honest in
genral because he still wears a wedding ring in a place like this, which can only mean it’s
stuck. We don’t get into that though.

“Ok, ok, hand it over.” I turned my back to him. It read:

The clemency of a gloomy day bath
Too hot, my dry parts sweat graciously
forgiving me
Silently severing the me not immersed
Blood like sugar like sickness choking on licked-already
stamps
with a classification of minerals on them

Amethyst azurite bornite biotite fluorite safflorite talc

Notre jeune assistant américain
forgiving me, si tu veux

The bath water, a skin tone tea
Filthy Filthy Walter Benjamin and the fight for crude and
material things
Blasphemy, eating watermelon on the equinox
Blasphemy, cold pickled artichoke hearts
Blasphemy, ta déjà le droit, park nudity

0 the theology of minute living!

In 5 minutes the world was created and destroyed
The body politic mourns the loss of itself
Nobody Knows how to garden on a field of copper
Still brass 7 billion pennies
Color of my bath water

I turned towards Charles. “You’ve been seeing Mariama. That French stuff.” He took
a step back and with a crack, a mirror shattered under his weight. It must have been on an
angle because the whole thing splintered, slits in the vortex of forever, reflected. “Shit, shit, fuck”, as he danced out of the mess, then looked at me with wolf eyes stuck in weakness.

“You treat everyone like ghosts, Charlie.” My face remained a professional parlor.

“You can’t--listen, I just--everything feels too many miles away, porous and fleeting...”

“Charlie, just stop. You’re putting flowers on a grave, buddy.” He shut up. I re-read the poem as he picked up the shards of mirror feebly, playing at indentured servant. If he can’t be loved, he will be pitied. “What do you mean by ‘the theology of minute living?’ I asked, but I had my own ideas.

“Have you ever colored an egg on Easter, you know, with dye?” he perked up.

“Easter?”

“Very good” he laughed nautically. “Jesus’s resurrection! A shaman who took God out of the trees and put him in a bush! What in the heck! His muddy death rituals are getting all these Bible babies covered in egg.” he panted, “And I can’t handle the stench anymore. Not of egg, not of death.”

“So no exit then? T’a déjà le droit? What’s that mean? I haven’t had a lesson for a while.”

“You--you’re--you’ve been, too?

“Not like that, god no, of course not. But, yeah, here and there with the lessons, when she isn’t working.”

“Listen, is this going to be a problem? I’m a customer, this is--” his meekness fled.
“You’re tired and hungry, Charlie, that’s where I want to leave it. So what about the French?” I couldn’t risk listening to excuses; he didn’t break any rules, but what do rulemakers know? He looked at a shard balanced on top of his loafers, shaking it off with a tap.

“T’a déjà le droit, park nudity,” his accent was poor, French does not glide atop Minnesota twang. “I went to Paris as a younger man, just for a summer. I would write in park Butte Chaumont, romantic business, blah blah. One day though, this small child, a girl, playing in the park, well, she ripped off her shirt and began to run around the other children shouting ‘J’ai le droit’, ‘I have the right’. A boy followed suit, but she became angry, yelled, ‘T’a déjà le droit’, ‘You already have the right’. I didn’t know what it meant then, I didn’t bother to learn, until–Anyway, it’s a nice anthem in any case, musical.”

“Do you have any laundry for me?”

“That’s it? Well, do you like it, the poem?”

“If you’re bath is really that dirty, I can try a harsher cleaner, might give you a rash, though.” The jackhammers started again, the mirrors began tingling, twitching. “I’ll be back when you put away your wares, Charlie!” I made my way to the door.

“But wait!” I didn’t. When I shut the door, the jackhammers stopped.

Chapter 3:

Across the Street
The same day, in the median strip of a road sandwiched by the Tick Tock Cafe, Louise’s Finest Meats, and an oversized neon sign that read DRUGS COSMETICS that had recently flickered off in respect to the bubbling sun, a woman sat on the bench next to the smallest dog park in the world; a forlorn English Mastiff sat cloistered by glorified chicken wire. He was clearly sad, though his belly was full and his metabolism thoroughly catalyzed by a multitude of brisk walks and cuddles. Yesterday, the rabbit was out of the cage in the backyard, he loved the rabbit, but his rabbit is in a cage, rabbit and cage, not in the backyard. He smelled, he saw, he ran, then he ripped. The blood of a friend was dripping down his snout as he realized rabbit, his rabbit, was not always in cage, sometimes rabbit was in backyard, but he hadn’t finished the equation in time. So he sat in the dog park in mourning, until he heard bang bang bang bang, fast and hard. He jolted, then he smelled it, blackberry jam? He began barking, squirming in circles. His owner asked him what was going on. Smells and sounds, you fool! She decided it was time to go home. She was sad; her dog killed her rabbit yesterday and she couldn’t be bothered to sleep last night. She tried to clip the leash on his collar, but he sprang out of the dog park, across the street, and began barking at a fenced off empty lot on the corner, doing the hot and cold boogie, sit down, stand up, turn around, repeat. Patricia caught up and clipped the leash successfully. She looked into the fenced off lot: no critters, just trash, rotten cacti. Patricia! Sounds and smells! “Come on, Buckwheat.” Buckwheat obliged reluctantly.
Chapter 4:

Room 204

It was time for 204’s duvet, but I didn’t know what I was going to say. The pink sticky light in the staircase went up my nose and forced static into my brain. I made it to the lobby where Jeremiah was reading a pamphlet.

“Hey, Jerry.”

“You ever heard of a Turing test?” he didn’t look up.

“Nope.”

“It says here ‘The Turing test is a test, developed by Alan Turing in 1950, of a machine’s ability to exhibit intelligent behaviour equivalent to, or indistinguishable from, that of a human.’ What do you think about that?”

“That’s fine as long as it can’t write poetry,” I lit a cig and sat in the leather chair. The coffee table was rectangular and wooden, except for a perfect square hole in the center. It once had a classy glass tile over it, but a guest broke it a while back trying to make a soapbox speech about how Venezuelan socialism was just a nationalist ploy to steal from the poor. He was effectively persuasive, even though he also had a lot of theories about nihilistic aliens infiltrating the White House. “Oh, and you’re right about Charles.”

“Goddamnit, god fucking damn it, what’d I tell you. What does he need them for anyway?”

“He masturbates to candle light with a pen.”
Jeremiah gave some teeth, “Damn, a little sadomasochistic, but everyone’s gotta play their own tune. No more, though, he’s a borderline hoarder, that guy,” he looked back into the pamphlet again. I ashed and got up.

“204 then.”

“Go get ‘em,” he kept reading.

I retrieved my cart from the 3rd floor and took the elevator down. Hell is an elevator ride forever, with pissed stained carpet and the instrumental of *La vie en rose* on repeat. On the second floor, a man like a potbellied pig, sweet in the eyes, slow on the move, scuffled past me, nodded. It must be Wednesday then. I knocked, “All clear?”

“Oui, entre!” Mariama opened the door. “Ça va?”

“Oui, yeah, pretty good—Uh, et toi, ça va?”

“Oui, merci.” Mariama wore a fluffy pink robe with hearts all over. She sat on the bed and started to twist her smaller braids into one side braid. “The duvet is in the corner. And I need more soap, maybe some lotion.”

“Was that Smalls?” I asked.

“Yeah, didn’t feel a thing,” she laughed, “Putain, quel con!”

“ Fucking asshole?”

“That’s right! At least he’s consistent. Every other appointment, I’m reminded to water him.” She got up and went to the bathroom, returning with a teacup full of water, setting it on the windowsill. She was a master of lighting, she exchanged all the commissioned lightbulbs for burnt orange and green ones. A red neon light made to look like kissing lips hung over the bed. It was hazy and warm, marshy and dense. The desk and the
sill were home to her small cacti collection, each a different breed: calico heart, thread agave, 
false ocotillo, bishop’s cap, wooly torch, cereus aethiops. She began watering them as I 
changed the sheets. “Pricks, tout le monde, each and every,” she said like speaking into a 
cloud.

“Which one is Charles?” I found my opening. She hiccuped.

“He’s like the rest, you know.”

“I know.”

“He’s the fuzzy one, doesn’t prick too hard,” she rubbed the oblong flora fur of the 
Silver Torch cactus with her middle finger. “He gave me a self-portrait, said it was a love 
token, the idiot,” she handed me a small mirror, pearl encrusted.

“But this is--”

“I know,” she laughed, “Like the rest, je dis. It could have been a clock or a million 
dollars, they see their reflection in everything.”

“I thought he was harmless.”

“Not in his eyes, his eyes need too much. Mais c’est comme ça. It was only a matter of 
time. Mon dieu, time is always the matter,” she finished watering Charles and turned. “My 
mother used to tell me the same story every summer Solstice when my father would be with 
his other wife in Dakar; we would stay in Saint-Louis. Anyway, it was about a town on the 
top of a plateau and a woman, Madame Verraine. She made these beautifully embroidered 
eye patches for everyone in the town because every inch of the place was covered in cacti. 
Everyone was clumsy, you know, so most people lost at least one eye to the sharpness if they 
weren’t already completely blind--Madame Verraine was blind. Anyway, a doctor came to the
town one day and started fixing everyone, but those with two working eyes started seeing, which of course made them angry because of the clarity, too harsh, so they start hurting each other and stealing, how else, you know. In the end, to make peace, Madame Verraine burned the doctor alive and re-blinded everyone with the cacti needles. Kind of sad, non?”

“Ignorance is bliss,” I tried to joke, but you can’t say that without sounding like a dumbass.

“Not that cliché shit. Non, non. The violence of existing, sometimes it’s secret, but you can see it in the eyes, it’s contagious,” she turned to look at me. “But fuck, I just think the Madame didn’t want to go out of business,” she snorted. I walked to the window next to the bed and lifted it open. The air was bitter.

“Do you have any paper clips?” I asked while watching a dog watch me in the apartment across the way.

“More, you mean?” she sounded tired.

“Yeah”

“Uh, check the drawer, top left.” I disengaged from the dog, it shuddered; I opened the drawer. “What are you building, anyway?” she asked.

“What?”

“What is it?”

“What is what?”

“You’re building something, non? Your plans? What is it?” she’s on the bed.

“No, I’m not building anything.”

“D’accord. Then what?”
“I don’t understand what you mean,” I only find bobby pins and fishnets in the drawer.

“Seriously? Stop fucking around, I want to know.”

“Look, they’re airtight, no-room-for-failure kind of plans, okay?” I look at her.

“I--but for what?” she’s almost mad. They’re plans. How am I supposed to know for what or when? I mean, I do, but why is that a point of discussion? It’s a fair question, I’ll concede, but it’s a kind of question that makes me think she doesn’t know me, like we’re in the same room and everything, but maybe the space is a different shape for her than it is for me and the contours and convexes of her bed or her elbow speak a language I’ve never learned. Friends are supposed to be fluent and use each other’s peanut butter without asking.

“D’accord, whatever,” her language betrays me, not in an uncomfortable way, but just to establish that line that draws itself between any two people.

I rummaged through the second drawer down. I found postcards from Senegal, the beach parts with primary colored boats all perched and ready, nets hanging off the sides, but you can’t smell the dead fish in a photo. A net is such a masterful innovation of entrapment; they’re even beautiful, especially two-dimensionally. But at night in bed, sometimes my sheets feel net-like and wet and that’s when I remember death.

I reached in the way back darkness and felt something like a naked grape. I yelped. Mariama laughed hard, “Go on, let’s see it.” I reached back in and grabbed a wiggly thing, not slippery per se, but it was warm in an alive way. I pulled out a brown lump; it was skin. With a nipple. Dome-like. A breast? The backside as smooth as clay. I laid it on my palm like a flesh mountain, it was so small. Mariama stood up and rummaged through the drawer,
drawing out a matching boob, as well as another pair of much larger breasts with areolas like irises, expansive, then two more, oblong, dark and seasoned. Balancing all of them in her arms, with her head she motioned to me to put the flesh mountain on the bed as she carefully arranged the rest at the foot of her comforter.

“Bah, voilà!” she turned back to the drawers and began pulling out maybe noodles? She then laid them down and that’s when I realized they were vaginas, some blushing and forested, others bruised colored and bare with labias that varied in length.

“I–are these what I think?” I confirmed fact.

“They’re my body. The parts that are not mine all the time, you know.”

“Excuse me?”

“I just had on those,” she pointed to the small breasts I initially fished out.

“What?”

“Smalls likes them tiny, comme une petite fille. And I have a pussy to match!” she gestured to a thin vagina with neatly compact labias, glistening, on the far left. She stood up and moved toward my face slowly, tired-like, each step she drooped until she was hunched enough to meet my eye level and close enough to drool on my nose. I didn’t move, not out of fear or surprise; one should plainly respect performances. Then before I could protest, she let her robe fall and disappear for a moment into the fog of right now.

“Voilà!” she sprang back, laughing and snorting, twirling. She was smooth and flat. She had butt, I expected that, but where her breasts would have been was a continuation of belly skin or maybe chest skin, a platform. Her vagina was gone, more smooth nothing. “Is it
not perfect? This is all the time mine!” she almost sang. She threw herself on the bed, the fleshy mess bouncing with her.

“You’re a goddamn innovator,” I replied.

“What do they say? Why buy the cow unless the cow is a multifaceted motherfucker?

“That’s exactly what they say,” I laughed.

“Now where is that other D?”

“Here.” I handed her the enormous boob that had flopped onto the floor.

“Ah, merci,” she placed it on her chest and it immediately fused to her, not a trace of disjunction. She repeated the process with the other. Then like choosing an outfit, she landed on a bushy forest with labias that could almost see the light of day, tangled in that impressive thickness. Again, it fused to her with ease.

“Am I symmetrical?” she presented her crafted physique.

“Well, your left tit is bit lower than your right.”

“Parfait! Good answer, I like them a little off kilter. Now darling, you’ll have to excuse me. I have a client coming up half past.”

“No problem. See you soon,” I collected myself and wheeled my cart out.

“Bisous, bisous!” she yelled before I shut the door. *She knows what she’s doing,* I smiled. But I forgot the paperclips.
Chapter 5:
The Basement

Sometimes I wish my uniform came with a cap or something, to define where I begin and end because if I don’t look in a mirror for long enough, I feel like I’m in every corner of the room and like my body is more a gaseous substance, maybe not even real. It’s freeing to forget you’re matter, but then you forget to matter and pleasure is slippery, but pain also feels impossible and I’m worried that I’ll be stuck that way forever if I don’t have a reminder of my confinement. I wouldn’t mind being a fly in molasses, that kind of view. I’m excited for the pool because it’s not everyday you’re weightless for a reason. That feeling makes sense in water. I am a fan of fish tanks, but that may already be evident. I just hope it’s circular. A lap pool would be offensive, gaudy. I made it to Jeremiah’s desk.

“Hey Jerry.”

“How’s our sunflower?”

“She’s a powerful set of legos, I’ll tell you that.”

“You all finished?”

“With what?”


“Rooms are clean, cart is in the closet, I’m tired. So yeah, done for the day.”

“You’re a marvel of the modern age. Here,” he handed me my paycheck.

“It’s not the end of the week,” I squinted.

“Yeah, well, I like taking liberties, especially when their timely,” he pushed the envelope into my hands. I shook it and my heart felt bulbous.
“Jerry!”

“You can’t say I ain’t done nothing for you.”

“I could cry.”

“Maybe don’t.”

“Okay,” I opened the envelope and beheld one, two, three, four, five, six, seven! Seven paper clips. All this bounty just for doing my job; I didn’t need a cap or a hat or even a beanie at that moment to feel my body all the way down to the knees. “Thanks, man.” I felt reckless.

“I’m going to take a nap.” He laid his head on the desk.

“Cool, cool.” Now I have too many paper clips, which is no matter, I’ll just have to factor in the excess for the plans, a joyous chore. They jangled in my pocket. Before I retired, I noticed the absence of the jackhammers.

The basement door stood ajar, slightly, no door handles to turn. I pushed it open and began the descent, the cold cement steps faded into the dank density of claustrophobic shadow. I felt my way down, and down. After what felt like too many steps, my foot found the floor. Tornado proof, I thought, although we don’t get tornados, you never know. My eyes began to see greyness and shapes. I lit a match. About ten feet away was a cage with a white fluff. I approached. The match burnt my fingers, darkness. I lit another, but the cage seemed to have moved perhaps a yard to the left, or not, but probably. It was an albino rabbit, just sniffing and staring. “Hey little bun, what are you doing in the underworld?” I asked his fuzzy lumps.

“Waiting,” another voice replied.

“What the hell!” And the match burnt me again, all went black. I quickly relit another.
“Calm down,” the voice turned on an electric camping lantern; it was my boss, Lady Grenadine. She was leaning on a support beam wearing a tweed jacket and scarlet bowtie, looking like a goddamn zoot suiter.

“Holy shit, Lady Grenadine. I feel like I’ve been shot,” I panted.

“Well, have you?”

“No, I--no.”

“Then perhaps you’re being inappropriate,” she walked toward me.

“Perhaps, but still, holy shit.” I looked at the rabbit, it seemed as indifferent as ever.

“What are you doing down here?” Her eyes narrowed.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“But you don’t own this building.” Her point being valid, I looked around; the space was completely empty, save for the grime.

“Hey, where’s the pool? There’s not even a jab at it,” I asked the expanse.

“Where’s your watch?”

“I don’t own a watch,” I checked my wrist to make sure.

“Well, I don’t own a pool. You should really have a watch. Tick tock,” she wagged her head, her curls wiggled.

“There are a bunch of clocks in this place.”

“A watch makes time personal,” she gestured to her own.

“That feels sticky to me.”

“You know what’s sticky? Honey, sap, peanut butter, dried soda. Those are some sticky things, wouldn’t you agree?”
“With peanut butter, it depends,” I measured. Lady Grenadine watched me, pausing to sigh and relax her shoulders.

“This is the stuff of banal dreams. I can’t work this way. You’re distracting me. All these people, all these people.”

“From what? What people?”

“I’m building a pool.”

“Excuse me, Lady Grenadine, but you’re clearly not. And what about the jackhammers?”

“Wouldn’t you say that a curtain is quite a nicety when the sun is too bright?”

“I would say that, yes. I would also say a curtain comes in handy when you’re hiding from sneaky peekers. I’m no fool.”

“Surprise, surprise. Tick tock and all that. You’re not the only one with plans,” she said sideways. My heart felt cloudy and sick. “Where were you born?” she continued.

“Room 206, you know that.”

“You’ll die here.”

“Where else?”

“Very well.” With that, she turned off the lamp, I heard her walk away. I should have known. No laces to tie up, just damp insufficiency obscured by the illusion of a journey.

END
Hotel No Tell (Film)

Link: [https://vimeo.com/213605627](https://vimeo.com/213605627)

Film Stills:
Silently severing the me not immersed
Process Document:
Cross-Conceptual Decoloniality

Part I:
Introduction and Pre-production

A work of art that both depends upon and rejects ritual is a product of capital and dialogue. Capital is the element suitable for presentation or exhibition, while dialogue refers to the historical development of art and techniques that necessarily influence each other. The institutionalization of art in the Western world has traditionally propagated the dominant or hegemonic culture, which obfuscates *coloniality* in favor of *modernity*. According to semiotician Walter Mignolo, modernity is “a complex narrative whose point of origin was Europe”, a narrative that celebrates the achievements of the West, while downplaying its own aggressions (2-3). It is precisely this kind of narrative, not without recognition of international conflict, but with clearly appointed victor and villains, which not only passively rejects the concepts of subjectivity and cultural relativism, but is also malicious in its implication that Western control and subjugation of less industrialized countries is more of a sequential destiny than overt exploitation and oppression. Coloniality is thus “the underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilization, from the Renaissance to today, of which historical colonialisms have been constitutive”; it is the counter narrative of modernity, rewritten to recognize atrocities committed by the Western world (Mignolo 1).
To combat the institutional narrative, *decolonial thinking* is a multifaceted effort to understand in order to overcome coloniality underneath the rhetoric of modernity. In art, decolonial thinking is disseminated through a variety of mediums, transcending aesthetic to enter a social dimension. Creative expression can therefore act as resistance to authority, for instances of resistance “do not derive from a few heterogenous principles”, but rather they are “distributed in an irregular fashion” to combat the complexity of the power dynamics to which it responds (Foucault 315).

*Hotel No Tell* is a conceptual art piece comprised of magical realist short prose and a surrealist stop-motion film, two distinct entities that exist in relation to one another on different planes, a project that spans across technique and medium in the interest of: 1) examining conceptual habits we form in the subconscious, 2) questioning the validity of linear narrative, and 3) upsetting the colonial matrix of power concerning the autonomy of the female body. My interpretation of decolonial thinking serves as a reaction to systemic violence. However, because colonialism does not directly affect me, I do not respond to it on a personal level in light of my privilege as a white American woman. Through a process of mindful appropriation and conceptualization, I create a dialogue between Latin American Magical Realism and European Surrealism and Dada to at once substantiate established decolonial artforms and to hybridize these forms to create a modernized cross-conceptual work that is distinctly personal and unique in temporality. The film component acts as a dream interpretation of the literary component. Through analysis of the genres themselves and select close readings, I create a fortified, research-based foundation from which my art-making derives, serving
as both inspiration and formula. In my reference to magical realism, I refer to Julio Cortazar and his short story “Axolotl”; although I recognize one artist is not reflective of an entire regional genre, nor the plurality of latinx identity, I maintain that counter narratives can be transnational if they respond to similar roots of violence, particularly regarding fascism, neo-imperialist capitalism, and occupation. By referencing the work of a select group of both Dadaists and Surrealists, I underline the politics within their art and context to examine their attempts to foster decoloniality, while also recognizing their appropriation of African and Oceanic art. Through these distinct examinations, I justify my own work.

**Part II:**

**Magical Realism as Counter-Narrative**

Mesoamerican codices, the earliest dated to 300 AD, contain pictographs that encompass a wide range of cultural subjects including cosmology, religion, history, geography, and astronomy. From the Olmecs to the Aztecs, ritual was art and conversely, art was ritual. Before the Spanish conquest and subsequent introduction of European paper, indigenous peoples utilized tree bark, deerskin, and plant fibers, varying from codex to codex, concretely exemplifying the concept of Pachamama, which is how the “Quechuan and Aymaran [pre-conquest indigenous theologians] understood the human relationship to life, with that energy that endangers and maintains life” (Mignolo 11). Therefore, in this conception, nature does not exist outside of culture, nature is culture. In *Mysticism and Logic*, Bertrand Russell asserts that “only
direct acquaintance can give knowledge of what is unique and new”, but in doing so, he dismisses mysticism, exacerbating the dissonance between Eurocentric and native ideologies, claiming that “the theoretical understanding of the world, which is the aim of philosophy, is not a matter of great practical importance to animals, or to savages, or even to most civilised men” (17). He separates nature from culture, and this distinction between the two dismantles Pachamama, thus introducing colonialism into “the domain of knowledge and subjectivity” (Mignolo 11).

Working in this domain, contemporary Latin American magical realism combats European absolutism. Western Christians separated nature from the human subject, asserting it as a “contradiction to culture”, negating the possibility of metaphysical plurality, while the Industrial Revolution ushered in a glorification of scientific reason, God became that which is empirical (Mignolo 11). This dissolution of Pachamama in favor of a Eurocentric definition of nature is a form of objective, symbolic violence, “a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning”, a monopoly of culture (Žižek 2).

The term “magical realism” in itself alludes to Western European “realism” and in doing so creates a dialogue, responding to imperialist imposition and commodification of knowledge, a sector of the colonial matrix of power. Magical realism versus realism thus parallels the relationships between primitive versus civilized and coloniality versus modernity. Referencing Robert E. Park, Ken Gelder claims, “There are no longer any communities wholly detached and isolated; all are interdependent economically and politically upon one another” (9). Magical Realism acknowledges
political interdependence and attempts to subvert realism in literature to reflect, through art, the matrix of tensions that cultural imposition breeds.

The genre is characterized by conflicting realities that may be perceived as existing in opposition, according to Western reason, while in fact these realities coexist within a narrative to question the absolutism of formulaic logic. Latin America has been a fertile ground for this genre; as both “native and colonial cultures have collided again and again…the primitive and modern still coexist” (Young and Hollaman 3). Neoliberal globalization of today, in tune with the objectives of Western capitalism, contributes to the skepticism of post-industrial society present in Latin American magical realism. It questions “the vanity of Western civilization” and encourages an understanding of cultural relativity (Young and Hollaman 3). The magical elements of mysticism and metaphysicality are present within the genre, but rather than focusing on the existence of this magic, this mode of fiction accepts the fantastical and mundane equally and simultaneously, rejecting materialist rationality common to the narrative of modernity.

According to Vladimir Lenin, an essential feature of imperialism is “the formation of international capitalist monopolies which share the world among themselves” (89). This monopolization of people and resources is a form of subjective violence, that which is implemented by a clearly identifiable agent (Žižek 1). However, imperialism also contributes to objective forms of violence: that of symbolic violence, exemplified by the Eurocentric imposition of a secular conceptualization of nature and logic, and that of systemic violence, which is the “often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of [capitalism] and [our] political systems” (Žižek 2). In this case,
capitalism is the spearhead of modernity, promoting the exploitation of non-Western nations through globalization.

Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian abstractionist who was an intimate friend and source of inspiration for Dada founder Hugo Ball, describes shifts from modernism to postmodernism: “the breaking up of the soulless-material life of nineteenth century…the falling down of the material supports, which were thought to be the only firm ones, the decay and dissolution of individual parts” (Young and Hollaman 170). He continues, after claiming what needs to be broken down, or deconstructed, to describe what is being built: “the psychic-spiritual life of the twentieth century which we are experiencing and which manifests and embodies itself even now in the strong, expressive, and definite forms” (Young and Hollaman 170). According to Kandinsky, form is the manifestation of “inner necessity”, the “creative spirit” that drives evolution and elevation in an artistic and transient social context, it is “the outer expression of inner content” (Young and Hollaman 156, 157). This necessitates a multiplicity of form, therefore rejecting the doctrine of absolutism so prevalent in religion, science, and any system reliant on the false dichotomies. It also rejects the Fascist phenomenon of inserting aesthetics into political life to beautify war and commodify the body. With this revolution of freedom in terms of expression, magical realism topples the regime of positivism, the idea that the passage of time implies positive progress, and acts as a form of decolonial thinking by creating anti-establishment narratives that subvert the Western realist monopoly of culture.

i. The Axolotl as Identity Crisis: Julio Cortazar
Grappling with the paradox between the pre-colonial past and the post-industrial present, Julio Cortazar creates an analogous union of the relationships between that of the human to the axolotl, a newt-like creature native to Mexico, and that of the European to the indigenous people of colonial Latin America. He explores the paradox of Latinx identity situated in a context of Eurocentric globalization. Cortazar’s short story “Axolotl”, published in 1952 in Buenos Aires, reveals the contradictions of modernity the subsequent empathetic rift between the West and those exploited by Western occupation and ideologies.

The narrator, upon regarding the axolotls in their habitat, knows they are somehow linked, “that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling [them] together” (Cortazar 4). This suggests the narrator exists in state-sponsored oblivion, reacting to the politics of memory, the erasure of transnational subjugation in favor of a celebratory Western narrative. Luis Martin-Cabrera regards memory and its cultural construction in relation to the state, emphasizing the error of “considering memory from an abstract and neutral vantage point...Memory is anchored in economic realities and thus subject to different power pressures” which is not separate from the interests of the state and capitalist institutions (9). Though Martin-Cabrera directly refers to post-dictatorship societies, Fascism and coloniality are correlational if we consider Latin America as a trans-temporal and physical space affected by systemic violence of capitalist exploitation since the the Spanish conquest. Fascist dictatorships in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, to name but a few, were monetarily sponsored by the United States under the guise of protecting a free-market economy. These contact zones between
Western and non-Western ideologies have violent implications, but also represent cultural bridges, much like Mesoamerican codices that utilize both pictographs and Spanish to communicate to the oppressor, although more so for the benefit of Spain than the natives. Bridges create access, yet the power dynamics of accessing culture can come with insidious intent when knowledge is weaponized. Hernán Cortéz walked across a bridge-like dyke system to reach Emperor Moctezuma in Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, a crossing that signified the beginning of the end. Cortéz’s translator, an Aztec women named La Malinche, is commonly considered a historical traitor, however to write her as a villain in an absolute sense is polemic and limited concerning her presumably relative lack of power.

Cortazar himself, after spending his formative years in Argentina, lived in Paris as a translator, a bridge between cultural contact zones by way of communication. His “Axolotl” also acts as a bridge. The analogy of the axolotl to the indigenous is extended to the realm of the supernatural when the narrator physically becomes the animal which so fascinates him, giving him the ability to truly empathize with the creatures and understand his own transnational identity. Through this magical realist lens, which couples the irrational to the rational, Cortazar examines the tension that exists within the perplexity of integrating indigenous identity into the European narrative.

The narrator reveals the axolotls’ Spanish name, “ajolote” (Cortazar 4). When the Spanish invaded Mesoamerica, the conquest brought an unprecedented imposition of culture through language and religion, as well as mass genocide. The Aztec and Mayan codices began utilizing the roman alphabet. Language as a mode of perception,
communication, and thinking cannot be contextually divorced from power and domination. Spaniards like the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa in the Yucatán Peninsula destroyed the majority of codices for their association with idolatry, an act of violent obfuscation of memory and culture. However those deemed free of idolatrous representations survived, as well as those successfully hidden by indigenous people. The Spanish also encouraged, if not coerced Aztec people to write codices for insights into newly conquered territories, a coerced anthropological record of the Other.

The most glaring aspect of the union between the European and the indigenous within the story is the physical environment in which the axolotls are fated to dwell. They live in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, the European cultural capital. This implies they were imported then commodified into attractions. Originally from Mexico, near what was Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City, they live in captivity in Paris, “lying in wait for something, a remote dominion destroyed, an age of liberty when the world had been that of the axolotls” (Cortazar 8). This references pre-conquest freedom regarding the agency that the indigenous people of Latin America, and other pre-existing societies, had over their environment and culture. But the axolotls, in their tank, “seem to abolish space and time with an indifferent immobility” (Cortazar 5-6). Is it indifference or rather an understanding of the futility of resisting their domination? The axolotls in the aquarium are now “huddled on the wretched narrow floor of moss and stone in the tank”, enduring a “liquid hell” (Cortazar 4, 8). The description is reminiscent of the conditions a slave might encounter; the narrator later refers to them as “slaves of their bodies” (Cortazar 7). The body is a space that can be imposed upon and colonized. A
contemporary example includes the female body. Women have little autonomy inside the colonial matrix of power, which relies on women as both commodity and fervent consumer. The habitat of the axolotls “is so cramped [they] barely move in any direction without [they’re] hitting one of the others with [their] tail or [their] head --difficulties arise, fights, tiredness” (Cortazar 8). This alludes to the profusion of resistance and discourse that can exist, even in contradiction, within the same strategy of power (Foucault 319). They have no room for movement or self-expression. Any movement is stilted by the reality of their situation and can even incite internal struggle. Cortazar utilizes the captivity of the animal to reflect the struggle to reconcile identity when it becomes obscured by the social and political hegemony, as well as the struggle of competing identities resisting the same sources of oppression, yet in different, often contradictory ways.

The axolotl itself is an animal which exemplifies duality and paradox. It is both past and present, alive and not yet born. It retains larval features throughout its adult life, a condition called neoteny, and is capable of reproducing even in this state. They can thrive both on dry land and underwater and “their oil was used (no longer used, it said) like cod liver oil”, alluding to their prior significance and utility (Cortazar 4). They have since been reduced to isolated attraction and study material. This exemplifies the Western capitalist conception of nature, “a repository of objectified, neutralized, and largely inert materiality that existed for the fulfillment of economic goals” (Mignolo 12). Their transplantation into the sterility of the tank removes them with the cyclicity of life and the concept of Pachamama. The axolotl’s head is characterized as having
“triangular sides which [gives] it a total likeness to a statuette corroded by time”, and that coupled with “their little pink Aztec faces”, they transgress the western European concept of linear time (Cortazar 6). Instead they exist in the “non-place”, which gestures toward “what has been abjected in the celebratory history of the politics of globalization and liberal democracy”, that which exists without fixed temporal context in the global narrative, but rather is perpetuated within collective consciousness of the oppressed, reflecting the reality of post-industrialism existing alongside the repercussions of coloniality (Martin-Cabrera 21).

The narrator is entranced by the axolotls’ physicality. He notes that “the eyes of the axolotls spoke to [him] of the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing” (Cortazar 6). Though in his human form, in his European identity, he cannot quite grasp this differing perspective, but he can recognize that it exists, which is sympathy, not empathy. He observes, “the axolotls were like witnesses of something, and at times like horrible judges” (Cortazar 7). It is the recognition within himself that his relationship to the axolotls is at once a form of solidarity and an imposition, for as a free being with agency and status in European culture, he feels a distant relationship to those who have been disenfranchised and captured. These creatures represent the outcasts of the industrial revolution, the failed consumers, exemplifying the “dispensability of human life”, again countering Western positivism (Mignolo 6).

Yet how do we reconcile the enigma of two identities competing within the same body: that of the Latin American and the European, of the observed and the observer? There exists a duality, two forms of equal significance, but a discrepancy in power
remains in the representation of these identities. When the narrator becomes an axolotl, he stares at his human form and knows no understanding would ever be possible between them. Through his therianthropic shapeshift into an axolotl, he obtains absolute empathy with these creatures, but can no longer relate to his European body. The glass cage becomes less of a barrier and more of a mirror, encompassing what the two respectively symbolize, and defining both identities in relation to the other, in conflict with the other, yet one is free while the other remains captive, unable to truly see the other.

Bertrand Russell writes, “Belief in reality quite different from what appears to the senses arises with irresistible force in certain moods, which are the source of most mysticism, and of most metaphysics. While such a mood is dominant, the need of logic is not felt” (19). Art is a part of this enigma, a hybrid movement that is being destroyed and perpetuated, that of mysticism within the market. Because the market is assumed to function according to its own logic, which is ideologically internalized within the social sphere resulting in the high-value of bourgeois cultural capital, there exists space for the metaphysical. However, the logic of the market is a Western invention, thus Latin American purveyors of magical realism fiction have the task of countering this logic by subverting the dominant historical narrative, projecting the counter-narrative into the realm of subjectivity and knowledge in order to dismantle the ideological hegemony through artistic innovation, promoting perceptions of a pluralistic reality, rejecting imperialism of the body and the mind
Part III:

DADA as Disruption, Surrealism as Ellipses

“In Zurich in 1915, losing interest in the slaughterhouse of the world war, we turned to the Fine Arts. While the thunder of the batteries rumbled in the distance, we pasted, we recited, we versified, we sang with all our soul. We searched for an elementary art that would, we thought, save mankind from the madness of these times.” -Jean Arp (Dadaist, poet, sculptor, anarchist)

As founder and director of the Surrealism, Andre Breton was heavily influenced by the Dada movement. He defines Surrealism in his 1924 Manifeste du surréalisme as "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner — the actual functioning of thought." Though Surrealism is less political and more freudian than Dada, many Dadaists became Surrealists during the 1920’s, after the First World War. WWI destroyed Europe both politically and physically, which allowed for a deconstruction of former perceptions of art and beauty, a recognition of the futility of existence, and a reevaluation of modernity as a perceived inevitability. The existence of freedom necessitates that of control. Whereas it could be postulated that before the 20th century, freedom and control were hegemonically inherent forces; the hierarchy of people, races, and classes went primarily unquestioned by the Western world. Before World War I, sparks of resistance under colonialism were evident in preceding revolutionary movements worldwide. Political examples include the American from the British, the South African Boers (also from the British), and the proliferation of the black Hand of Serbia. Artistic innovations were sowing the ground for imminent sub-cultural
movements by way of impressionism, symbolism, and romanticism, attempting to break conceived expressive restraints. Thus, the 20th century became a unique ideological turning point in the violent rupture of socio-political systems during WWI, prompting remonstration concerning the absolutism of control and the limitations of freedom. European artists, particularly those of the Dada and Surrealist movements, manifested their skepticism of the industrialized, neoliberal worldview through both their work and collectivism. The same breaking down of 19th century materialism that Kandinsky describes also applies to artistic and ideological shifts within Europe itself.

Thus, the movement arbitrarily entitled Dada, a nonsense word, began in Zurich during the winter of 1916 with Hugo Ball’s commencement of Cabaret Voltaire, a theater at the disposal of artists from across Europe, a platform on which to revel in the Bang Bang Boom Boom, simultaneous poetry, performance without narrative, outside of reason, for Western bourgeois reason was believed to be the catalyst for war. The movement was subsequently headed by Tristan Tzara, a Rumanian artist. Hugo Ball writes, “The Dadaist fights against the death throes and the death-drunkneness of his time...He knows that this world of systems has gone to pieces” (Stangos 111). Dada focuses on the disruption of social and political normality, a movement of negation opposed to all formulas imposed by man, influenced by the nihilistic spirit attributed to the Lost Generation disillusioned by the war (Chipp, 367). Dada, fiercely internationalist, was as political as it was paradoxically anti-aesthetic, a critique of the bourgeoisie and its value systems, which had created an environment where mass slaughter was encouraged and even fetishized through fervent nationalism, epitomized
in the violence of WWI. The very nature of the war’s brutality and carnage called into question the representations of “savagery” and “civility” in relation to Western civilization. Brutality and savagery was conceived to belong to the colonies, less industrialized nations, therefore “lesser” nations. Anti-imperialist sentiment is clear in the Dadaist appreciation and reckless appropriation of African and Oceanic art. Dada is defined by its lack of artistic criteria; it is multi-media anti-art. By investigating the works of certain artists within the movement, they reveal explicit and implicit reactions against objective violence, examples of which include coloniality, bourgeois nationalism, and the industrial revolution, all working within a Western capitalist ideology.

i. The Appropriation of the Savage: Jean Arp and Marcel Janco

International political tension was brewing in the 19th century, stemming from the concept of the nation as an autonomous body that must generate capital, which in some instances manifested in the partition and colonization of less industrialized countries. The colonies, as resources for Europe to finance its nation building and subsequently its war efforts through the export of raw materials and manpower in the form of soldiers and laborers, served as geographical indicators of the globality of the war.

According to the the Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture, a “savage” is defined as an “inhabitant of forests who lives far away from cities and so-called civilized people” and has thus taken on the derogatory meaning of “unsociable or rough”. Insofar as the definition contains problematic language that implies Western cultural dominance as the center of empire, it implies a dichotomy, a codependent
relationship between “savage” and “civilized”; one cannot exist without the other, they
necessitate the other, creating a spectrum at which the words are placed at opposite
ends. However, this spectrum is skewed, their meaning defined and perceived by the
“civilized” Western world.

The name “Dada” is evocative of primitiveness. Regarding African art that is as
functionally ritualistic as it is aesthetic, like fetish objects and even tools, Jean Arp, a
prominent Dadaist, wanted art to be collective and anonymous. He primarily worked
with wood reliefs and collages, rejecting oil painting, describing the medium as “too
weighed down in tradition and connected with man’s exaltation of himself” (Stangos,
114). Of Dada, Arp writes, “Dada is senseless which does not mean nonsense. Dada is
senseless like nature. Dada is for nature and against art. Dada is direct like nature”
(Stangos, 114). Here he evokes the concept of Panchama. His perspective justifies his
medium in relation to cultures that do not manifest the values of Western artistic
tradition. He exemplifies this in his Portrait of Tristan Tzara (1916/17, wood).
Marcel Janco, a fellow French Dadaist and Arp’s contemporary, shared similar sentiments concerning forms of abstract, more elementary art, evidenced by his own Portrait of Tristan Tzara (1919, mixed media), which is evocative of Oceanic ritual dance masks and African ceremonial masks, at once appropriating the style and recontextualizing it in his goal of “shocking the bourgeois, demolishing his idea of art, attacking common sense, public opinion, education, institutions, museums, good taste, in short, the whole prevailing order” (Concepts of Modern Art, 120). His almost childish style accomplishes the kind of subversive techniques Dada preached.

ii. Opposing Bourgeois Nationalism: Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia

Of the artists who found refuge, both figuratively and literally, at Cabaret Voltaire, Richard Huelsenbeck is among them, an artist and fellow German objector alongside Hugo Ball. He writes:

“We were agreed that the war had been contrived by the various governments for the most autocratic, sordid, and materialistic reasons...None of us had much appreciation for the kind of courage it take to get shot for the idea
of a nation which is at best a cartel of pelt merchants and profiteers in leather, at
worst a cultural association of psychopaths” (Chipp, 377).

Wartime visual art and slogans manifested in the form of pro-establishment
propaganda, which galvanized citizens to donate their bodies and the bodies of loved
ones for the war effort, and in doing so, they donated their minds to the rhetoric of
absolutism, conformity and patriotism. Absolutism is present anywhere there exists a
perceived polemic dichotomy, relevant to the rhetoric of modernity. In contrast, Dada
argues for paradox, for both plurality and nothingness. Tristan Tzara explains that for a
systemically refined, bourgeois public, “a Dadaist is the equivalent of a leper...They treat
us with that remnant of elegance that comes from their old habit of belief in progress”
(Chipp, 385). Dadaist is at once a conscientious objector and embodies an affront to
one’s worldview. The Dadaists had slogans of their own.

Dada Slogan, Berlin, 1919:

“DADA
stands on
the side of the revolutionary
Proletariat
Open up at last
your head
Leave it free
for the
demands of our age

Down with art

Down with

bourgeois intellectualism

Art is dead

Long live

the machine art

of Tatlin

DADA

is the

voluntary destruction

of the

bourgeois world of ideas”

Thus, to uphold these subversive values and to reject art as lofty, elitist
entertainment and sources of nationalist pride, the Dada gesture was born, transitory
works that were conceptual and ironic, not meant to be bought or valued. Francis
Picabia was a master of the gesture. A French artist, he was already established as both
a cubist and an impressionist, but his tendency as a political agitator drew him to Dada.
His work *L’oeil Cacodylate* (1921, oil and photo collage) epitomizes the devaluation of
art. Picabia had his artistic and literary friends sign the piece; it’s essentially a collection
of signatures from people of internationality, which trivializes and mocks the concept of
signing art for the sake of a sale or to represent the traditions of one particular nation. In
this vein, there exists an inherent
democratization of art because its
definition has been stretched and
warped and laughed at in such a way
that theoretically insists that anyone can
do it if they so choose.

Marcel Duchamp’s concept of a
readymade exemplifies this radical
approach to art. Though a precursor to
the Dada movement in a temporal sense,
he was a purveyor of anti-art before
Cabaret Voltaire ever exalted him. A
readymade is a prefabricated, commonplace
object or combination of objects that are
designated as art. In New York, beginning
in 1914 with his *Bottlerack*, he revolutionized
anti-creativity. Of this concept and choice of
object, he claims, “The choice was based on
a reaction of visual indifference, with at the
same time a total absence of good or bad
taste, in fact a complete anaesthesia”
(Stangos,119).
Though Duchamp eventually gave up art altogether, focusing on chess and mechanical experimentation, he remained sympathetic to the nihilism that Dada promoted; Dada itself is a metaphysical attitude rooted in existentialism. In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes:

“I do not know of any more profound difference in the whole orientation of an artist than this, whether he looks at his work in progress (at ‘himself’) from the point of view of the witness or whether he has ‘forgotten the world,’ which is the essential feature of all monological art; it is based on forgetting, it is the music of forgetting” (324).

To forget the audience and create subjectively is a manifestation of metaphysical ideology, which translates to that which is beyond the realm of the physical, beyond the ego of the individual, and, in a political context, beyond the ego of a nation.

iii. Cutting Through Industrial Smog: Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann

Jean Arp writes, “The Renaissance taught men how proudly to exalt their reason. The science and technology of modern times has dedicated men to megalomania. That reason has been overvalued, this has caused the confusion of our era” (Chipp, 390). The socio-political implications of World War I exemplifies this “megalomania”. The arms race of 1890 to 1914 involving naval and artillery innovations between Germany and Britain (though both France and Russia also participated peripherally) was catalyzed by nationalist interest to claim technological power over other European nations and colonial holdings. The Industrial Revolution generated a shift from wooden ships to steel ones that relied on steam engines; large long-range guns replaced canons. By the
start of the war, Britain had the most technologically advanced ships and the largest navy. The race stemmed from Wilhelm II’s prerogative to challenge Britain’s fleet, as well as rising competition to control small island territories, which prompted preparations for war a couple of decades before the summer of 1914; it was indicative of the pro-industry sentiment of the time, to keep building, keep the wheel of ‘progress’ turning, regardless of the consequences.

Technology changed the nature of warfare. World War I saw the merge of old and the new, where traditional strategies and politics met with modern innovation and divisiveness, resulting in unanticipated carnage and millions of casualties. The Western Front is a prime example of this deadly chronological merge. Trench warfare, a tactic developed during the U.S. Civil War, became a feature of the Western Front. The Western Front saw both bayonets and machine guns used in tandem, a disjunction of “efforts to substitute mechanical for manual labor on an extensive scale” (Lenin 24). The practice of replacing manpower with machines is applicable to the state of transitional and transnational warfare that characterized WWI. Dada responds to this with its own representation of mechanical innovation.

Though 20th century collage may have been primarily the invention of Pablo Picasso, the Dadaists adopted the technique, embellishing the concept with photo montage to create satirical work that comments on the arrogance of industry. Hannah Höch, a German Dada collagist and frequent contributor to Cabaret Voltaire, admits that the idea of photo montage was stolen from Prussian army regiments, who would insert the photographed faces of paying civilians into the cutout of a group of uniformed men
in elaborate oleolithographed mounts. However, while the initial purpose was to idealize reality, Dada attempted to “give something entirely unreal all the appearance of something real that had actually been photographed” (Chipp 396). Höch writes, “Our whole purpose was to integrate objects from the world of machines and industry in the world of art. Our typographical collages or montages set out to achieve this by imposing, on something which could only be produced by hand, the appearances of something that had been entirely composed by a machine” (Chipp, 396). In her Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Beer-Belly of the Weimar Republic (1919, collage of pasted papers), she represents the chaos and violence of industry, of the literal and metaphorical cogs of society, and at once humanizes the cacophony and alienates the viewer with the inclusion of faces, either whole, mutilated, or repeated.

Raoul Hausmann, an Austrian Dadaist, echoes similar sentiments, critiquing scientific reason in his Tatlin Lives at Home (1920, photo montage and watercolor). He questions the objectivity of scientific reason, which dominates the brain of man, while
remaining outside the physicality of the body; the human organs are presented as dismembered material for empirical study, distancing the mind from the corporeality of the body. Alongside Duchamp’s industrial fabricated readymades, the Dada movement sought to question art as institution, not solely through concept, but also through the invention of form which could more accurately represent the multifaceted manifestations of violence present in warfare, and more subtly within Eurocentric social and political ideology.

Walter Benjamin recognizes the importance of Dada and Surrealism when he claims that when authenticity ceases to be an important part of making art, "the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual it begins to be based on another practice, politics” (19). Politics is the ritualization of controlling the body politic. Control of the body is at once an individualized task and a societal one. Though World War I helped to foster the Western narrative of modernity, the Dadaist and Surrealist response to the war forged the foundation for artistic postmodernism of today,
promoting criticality and anti-elitism, democratizing concept, and glorifying the sense
in senselessness.

**Part IV:**

**Production: Fulfilling My Manifesto**

I had a dream that I was in a candle-lit bar, bouncy and dark. The wicks of the
candles were short and angry, so it was an evening of perpetually lighting candles with
matches, not much else. “Hotel No Tell” was inscribed, almost embroidered, on the
matchboxes. The next day, I created an ink and watercolor piece depicting a wine bottle
as a candle holder, a matchbox, and a plethora of shriveled matches. As I considered the
implications of drawing direct inspiration from a dream, I recalled my visualization of
the “Hotel No Tell” logo on the matches, sensing a gravity in its name; my story begins
with a particular need for more matches. It is born of subconscious inspiration,
maintaining a decidedly magical realist structure. In Chapter 3, I allude to the potential
that Hotel No Tell doesn’t exist at all, but is rather a vacant lot, the presence only
detectable to a dog, Buckwheat. By creating a complementary film, I speak to this
potential for absence and absurdism, visually manifested and thus more visceral,
allowing more opportunities for visual play and palpable emotion, in contrast to the
intentional crudeness of my stop-motion’s graceless movement.

Considering my academic and personal interest in surrealism, the emphasis on
the subconscious is contingent on the repetition of certain symbols or images and the
illogical rhetoric one might encounter during sleep; this rejection of materiality and
acceptance of rational relativism is key in my interpretation of magical realism. As a
white American female, I do not feel that it is my place to explicitly react to constitutive colonialisms by which I am not directly affected; it is not my story to tell. I do seek to convey activism and resistance to oppressive, hegemonic, and patriarchal forces through art production and specific, considerate implementation of magical realism.

Like the cultural and literal bridges I previously consider in Part I, the two works are codependent entities working in relation to one another while abiding by different systemic narrations, yet the crossover between them is still evident and even necessary, a representation of the overlapping elements of Dada, surrealism and magical realism; my pieces affect each other, while refusing to merge completely, they are sympathetic, but cannot empathize with each other. This tension is representative of the crisis between our mutually exclusive conscious and subconscious identities. The tension is magnified when considering identity in a socio-political context within the dynamics of power.

Both of my pieces consider the female body as sites of occupation, malleable and detachable. Miriama, the Senegalese prostitute is a “powerful set of legos”, yet is empowered by the knowledge of her own objectification and capitalizes on it. She is powerful in her awareness, exemplified by her cacti collection. In the film, genitalia is exceedingly prominent, thus losing its sexual secrecy, a liminal subversion of social normalities. In this way, a vagina, or that which is symbolic of a vagina, is at once a source of resistance, as well a quotidian sight.

Through shared symbols and images expressed differently, the pieces work together to upset linear time progression. In my prose, Miriama references a story her
mother used to tell her about cacti gouging eyes, which seemingly benefits society because citizens exist in partial ignorance, although the fabled Madame Verraine monetarily benefits by selling eyepatches; thus the citizens live in illusion. In the film, the garden of cacti and gouged eyes is physically expressed, but it exists as an Eden-like space. Once the figure bites the eye, she is gifted with self-awareness and exploration.

Both pieces lack concrete resolution. They beget more questions than they give answers, which intentionally draws attention to the desire for a specific rationality or explanation, emphasizing human attraction to absolutist ideology. Both are open for interpretation, which can be unsatisfying, yet it is meant to catalyze inquiry into the limitations of accepted logic, the tension that arises from the compartmentalization of the subconscious, and to foster consideration for art production as a form of decolonial thinking through subversion of mediums and liminal expression.
Works Cited:


