

Diasporic Queering and Intimacies of the Creole Being

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*n the Caribbean we are all performers.
—Antonio Benítez-Rojo*

In Isabelle Allende's 2010 novel *Island Beneath the Sea*—a tale of love, betrayal, revolution, and slavery set in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Haiti (then Saint-Domingue), Cuba, and New Orleans—Tété, an enslaved woman, becomes the lover of an enslaved majordomo named Zacharie, “a very tall, handsome black [man] . . . dressed like a *grand blanc*, as fresh and perfumed as if he had just come from his bath.”¹ Zacharie's elegantly clad black body exuded a liberated, black subjectivity, even though he was enslaved. Coupled with his physical appearance, Zacharie's dignified yet slightly defiant demeanor and his imperturbable self-determination gave him a rebellious swagger. As a self-proclaimed black dandy, Zacharie laid claim to the respectability associated with the white dandy figure of the nineteenth century, an “aesthetic of the self” that was unequivocally denied to black enslaved people. For Zacharie, self-styling was central to fashioning the self; however, his “two greatest sins—visibility and indiscretion”—were major transgressions in a “society where black people had clearly demarcated positions.”² Being a black dandy, Zacharie exhibited a clear and direct disregard for his prescribed position in the racial and class hierarchies of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Saint-Domingue.

“Two white men, almost as well dressed as Zacharie,” Tété narrates, “looked him up and down with a sardonic expression. One of them spit very close to Zacharie's feet, but he didn't notice, or preferred to ignore it.”³ Indeed, Zacharie's elegant demeanor and defiance of eighteenth-century racial hegemony was a societal transgression, and, as Allende writes, he was duly punished with a brutal beating at the hands of resentful whites:

[Zacharie] was no longer the handsome man he had been; his face was like a Carnival mask. That was how he'd looked since being attacked. It had been night, and he was beaten unmercifully; he had not seen the men who come at him with clubs, but as they did not steal his money . . . [.] he knew they were no bandits from Le Marais. Tété had warned him more than once that his overly elegant figure and generosity were offensive to some whites.⁴

Unfortunately, in any society that has strict hierarchies, black men who do not conform to their clearly defined positions have been ridiculed and exposed to violence. Monica L. Miller's discussion in *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* about the stakes of dandyism well characterizes Zacharie's search for self-actualization and desire to overcome his racially coded position of subjugation. Miller contends that the status of dandyism, "as a ubiquitous, popular performance full of ambivalence[,] . . . should visualize the limitations that black people must negotiate and recombine as part of the art of self-definition." Miller further argues that when the black body is used as "cultural capital and clothing as a necessary but unstable currency of self-worth, a dandy's style reveals the *value* of blackness in which . . . the cost of embodying or performing blackness can be both too cheap and too dear."⁵

Like the dandy, the figure of the flaneur was also interested in a bellicose performativity that imparted a sense of modernity, mobility, oppositionality, and power.⁶ The dandy was about public sartorial performance, and, according to Charles Baudelaire, the flaneur embodied a white male presence throughout the nineteenth-century public sphere. What differentiates the flaneur from the dandy is that the flaneur walks through the urban city in his black frock coat and black top hat, signifying the perfect modern, austere, urban bourgeoisie, and he anonymously shuns attention yet observes and comments on his environment; he has spectatorial and sartorial authority.⁷ The dandy is unable to be anonymous because of the creative splendor of his dress and carriage; the dandy is the object of the gaze. However, what both characters share is a conscious, corporeal self-presentation and self-identification, an "expressivity" that disrupts social order, conformity, and hierarchies. In this essay I will discuss briefly the well-known public performance *Negerhosen2000* (2000–) by artist Jean-Ulrick Désert, drawing on what E. Patrick Johnson calls a "quare" sensibility, which has race at its core as "historically contingent and socially and culturally constructed/performed" and addresses the "material effects of race in a white supremacist society."⁸

As a series of performances and photographs offered as a creative response to the madness of racial *and* homophobic violence, *Negerhosen2000* deploys an inconspicuous visibility. As a multidisciplinary conceptual artist who works in drawing, sculpture, photography, performance art, and installation-based work, Désert has produced an engaging body of work that focuses on the interplay between culture, history, memory, and language. In part of this essay, I will explore the ways the concepts of the flaneur and the sardonic splendor of the dandy inform *Negerhosen2000*'s "troubling presence" as Désert's black body strolls throughout various European metropolises, decked out in his embellished and stylized white leather lederhosen, which are delicately embroidered. He wears fake, teased blond hair extensions that peek from beneath a grey felt hat adorned with narcissus flowers, and his ensemble is completed by a small Alpine cowbell choker encircling his neck. It is the questioning of the protean nature of black subjectivity and the disruption of social codes that make *Negerhosen2000* a provocative and politicized performance that occurs between racial visibility and sartorial play. By bringing together both extremes—the mobility, modernity, and impervious nature of the flaneur and the resplendent figure of the dandy—Désert uses the destabilizing power embedded in the visual and explores the signifying possibilities that exist in a *polycultural* *visuality* that resides at "the realm of the hyphen—the place where two [or more] worlds collide or blend together."⁹

Furthermore, I will discuss Désert's "self-portrait" drawing series *L'ABCdaire de ma vie privée* (*The ABCs of My Private Life*; 2005). Like *Negerhosen2000*, *L'ABCdaire* offers an opportunity to explore evocative ideas about intimacy, race, cultural identity, and memory.¹⁰ Four ink drawings on velum, with commingling words and images—each drawing incorporates several childhood portraits of the artist—*L'ABCdaire* allows for the full engagement with what W. J. T. Mitchell calls "metapictures": the visual participates in "a second-order discourse that attempts to reflect on the first-order discourse."¹¹ An experimentation with form and language (word

play and code switching), the asymmetrically placed images vie for pictorial space, illustrating the autobiographical nature of selfhood. Using four different languages and personal and culturally specific images, these works are reactions to the complexities of living in the Haitian *dyaspora*, living *endezo*, in that “in-between” space of difference: the interstitial space of identity.¹² The provocative deployment of *endezo* offers the opportunity to rethink the ways Haitian diasporic identity is reformulated in contemporary transnational spaces constituted by discursive differences in ethnicity, language, and history. As a critically potential concept, *endezo* creates aesthetic spaces for sexuality and language, blending the two so they accurately reflect the materiality of “collective frameworks of memory” while they are “haunted by images of home and homeland” as they discloses some of the “furtive pleasures of exile.”¹³

“In its most essential form,” Valerie Cassel Oliver writes in *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970*, “Conceptual Art serves to privilege ‘concept’ over ‘material,’ which is somewhat of a paradox since concept is germane to art making in general. However, the ‘concept’ within Conceptualism is more ideological.” She continues, “By imploding the hierarchy of art, art making, and presentation, the Conceptual Art movement in effect has transformed the visual arts landscape, shifting the paradigm outward from an imperialistic and exclusionary center to embrace divergent and diverse artistic expressions.”¹⁴ In a recent text-based installation *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos (Do Not Cast Pearls before Swine; 2016)*, Désert conveys a conceptual intimacy that is found in the familiarity and informality of culture and language, elements that are present in varying degrees in *Negerhosen2000* and *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*. His *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* illustrates how we might understand conceptual artistic practices to include the politics of representation as tools for negotiating the experiences and realities of gender transgressing lives in the black diaspora at a moment of extreme violence, issues that have been explored in his

earlier performance *Negerhosen2000*. In *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, Désert excerpts a Bible passages in Latin, taken from Matthew, one of the Gospels in the New Testament to allude to the regulatory powers of language as it is used to control and normalize sexual orientation and same-sex desire. Désert produces this passage in several different creole languages, including Kreyol (Haiti), patois (Jamaica), Sranan Tongo (Suriname), and Papiamentu (Curaçao). Discussing this artwork allows us to explore the “intimacy” of creole languages, their liberatory practices, and the transgressive possibilities evoked by their use when French, English, Spanish, and Dutch do not operate as the dominate lingua franca during moments of intimacy and resistance. I suggest intimacy here to evoke the power that resides in a shared knowledge, as in the intimacy of knowing and in the intimacy of knowledge making. In its conceptual formulation, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* seeks to question the regulatory power embedded in religious ideologies as they attempt to disempower queer Caribbean communities. I propose that all three art pieces, in different ways, interrogate the ways the term *queer*, as a Western concept, does not sufficiently capture the lives of those living in and outside the Caribbean whose gender and sexualities do not fall within hermetic concepts fostered by a Western ideology that does not privilege the differences in language, region, and ethnicity. Rather, it is within the exploratory nature of identity, representation, and the performative dimensions of self-representation that I situate these artworks. I contend that these three art pieces employ the creative and performative racialized strategies of *endezo* and Johnson’s reformulation of queer as “quare.” Johnson defines *quare* subjectivity as not only *speaking* across identities but *articulating* identities as well. In Johnson’s black Southern vernacular reformulation, “quareness” considers ways to destabilize notions of identity and “at the same time locate racialized and class knowledges.”¹⁵ For Johnson *queer* does not address the “culture-specific positionality” that is necessary to understand the complexities of and meanings within race, ethnicity, language, and diaspora. As a “disciplinary expansion,” he wishes to “quare” queer so that “ways of knowing are viewed both as discursively mediated and as historically situated and materially conditioned . . . foreground [in] the ways in which lesbians, bisexuals, gays and transgendered people of color come to sexual and racial knowledge.”¹⁶

I use Johnson’s term to explore the potential for agency and the authority of spaces and histories. Drawing on these works, I ask how might we understand creole within culture, performance, and language as a space that offers the possibilities to illustrate power, subterfuge, and intimacy. How might we employ what Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley calls the “doubly signifying Creole vocabulary” as a key concept that marks contemporary art practices, whereby conceptualizing the Caribbean self as an embodiment of criticality interrogating cultural and linguistic borders?¹⁷ What I would like to consider is how black gender-non-conforming queer Caribbean bodies exist within the intimacy of creole languages.

I began this essay by highlighting several passages from Allende's novel to illustrate subjugated positions and the investigation and function of black subjectivity. Using an embodied utopia and a controlled use of magical realism, the novel allows for a contemplation of a possible future for black selfhood. What we can glean from the performances of *Negerhosen2000* and *L'ABCdaire* is a questioning of the results of migration and the visualization of a racialized subject. In exploring the interplay between self-fashioning, racial looking, and racial being, *Negerhosen2000* considers the uneasy circulation of "blackness" across a variety of European geographical settings while exploring the discomfort produced by black bodies traveling outside their conventional historical and cultural milieu. It is that uneasiness that erupted into violence on the body of Allende's fictional character Zacharie. Conversely, *L'ABCdaire* engages with the troubling realities of foreign mappings and routes. Correspondingly, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* looks at the ways these migrating bodies are policed by religious fundamentalism and violence because of queer sexualities. In *Negerhosen2000* and *L'ABCdaire* Désert's black body functions as the narrative element in these culturally specific tales of movement, including the haunting effects of rupture caused by migration. In *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* black bodies are absent, yet they are hauntingly present in the intimate spaces that can only be *troubled* by those who do not belong. These aspects often mirror the diasporic postmodern condition, that is, an ontological condition that exists within a *livability* on the margin that combines the slippery and vexed issues of race, language, and sexuality.

"Quaring" in the *Dyaspóra*: *Negerhosen2000*

As an enabling framework of postmodernity, performance puts forth varying degrees of positionality, subjectivity, and resistance. Performance becomes a valuable artistic strategy to investigate the discursive use of "blackness" and "queerness" in *Negerhosen2000*.¹⁸ Unlike Claude Baudelaire's and Walter Benjamin's flâneur, who is indubitably articulated as nineteenth-century male, white, and heterosexual, Désert in *Negerhosen2000* is twenty-first-century diasporic, black, and queer, or, perhaps more fruitful to my analysis is E. Patrick Johnson's reformulation of queer as "quare." Johnson defines *quare* subjectivity as not only *speaking* across identities but *articulating* identities as well. In Johnson's reformulation, "quareness" considers ways to destabilize notions of identity and "at the same time locate racialized and class knowledges."¹⁹ Drawing on Johnson's critical use of vocabulary, I would like to cautiously propose the possibilities for words such as *masisi*, *madivine* or *madivinez*, and *makòmè* can offer a contemplative space to think of creative and critical ways for envisioning sexualities identities and difference and ways of living and being that are not constitutive of the foreign but created and grounded in local so that the Euro-American/North American

term such as the theoretical potent and transformed term *queer* can be replaced by culturally specific words that also disruptive normative understandings of same-sex-desiring/-loving and gender-transgressing individuals. Johnson's grandmother's "thick, black, southern dialect" changes the inflection from "queer" to "quare."²⁰ Conversely, poet and performance artist Lenelle Moïse offers us an equally radical reading of the term *madivinez*:

i keep
my haitian-kreyol-english
dictionary
behind the colored pen-
cils.

its red cover taunts me,
daily.
i am often too afraid
to open it. i picked it up
once—
when i first got it—hungry
for familiar
words that could make me
feel home. i tried
to look up lesbian
but the little red book
denied
my existence.

i called you, remember?
mommi, how do you say
lesbian in kreyol?

oh, you said,
you say madivinez but
it's not a positive word.
it's vulgar.
no one wants to be
called madivinez.
it's like saying dyke.

but how
can cruelty sound
so beautiful?
madivinez
sounds so glamorous.
something i want

to be. madivinez.
my divine?
sounds so
holy.

i thank you
and hang up the phone
to repeat
my vulgar
gift word
as I write it
into the dictionary,
next to ke,
kreyol
for heart.

glamorous, holy, haitian dyke heart.
something i want
to be.²¹

Moïse's mother's Haitian-accented English brings about the poet's fascination with the fantastic-sounding *madivinez*. Its alluring sound makes it divine; like *quare*, it opens the complex possibilities of women loving women, a tradition in which, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley reminds us, "captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds." In doing so, they were "resisting the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by *feeling* and *feeling for* their co-occupants on these ships."²² The beauty of the sound of the word *madivinez*, either in its inflection or in the ways Moïse has imbued it with a certain *quare* beauty, follows the delicate racial public negotiations of *Negerhosen2000* (and in the linguistic empowerment of *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, discussed later). In her poem, Moïse answers Tinsley's questions—"So can a woman be *queer* in Patwa or Keyròl or Sranan, and should she want to be?"—yes and yes.²³

The figure of the flâneur appeared in the work of Claude Baudelaire, which he associated with mid-nineteenth-century Paris.²⁴ Decades later Walter Benjamin, the German Marxist and cofounder of the Frankfurt School, took up the figure of the flâneur in his analysis of Baudelaire.²⁵ For Baudelaire and Benjamin, Gregory Shaya notes, "the *flâneur* was a . . . figure of the modern artist-poet, a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city," the *invisible* modern spectator/observer.²⁶ The flâneur was an artist and a surveyor of the modern(izing) city, a detached observer, an allegorical figure, free to skim across the surface of the city and taste all its pleasure with curiosity and interest. The white maleness of the flâneur allowed him a certain unfettered mobility unhampered by gender, race, and sexual orientation.²⁷ Appearing in late-eighteenth-century Britain as a well-dressed man about town wandering from cabaret to cabaret elegantly clad and smartly stylish, the dandy was a social experiment.²⁸ Evoking fin de siècle societal transformations and revolutionary upheavals, dandyism in France was an intellectual and aesthetic movement born out of a particular aesthetic and historical moment to ridicule and expose the pretentiousness of the aristocratic.²⁹ Positioned at the crossroads between consumption and visibility and employing the "affective power of the circulation of blackness" in his author narrator self, in *Negerhosen2000* Désert offers the sartorial pastiche of the dandy as well as the observant voyeuristic pleasure of the flâneur.³⁰ As a black flâneur, *Negerhosen2000* is engaged with the visibilities of reality, making visible what has been invisible (history) and documenting what is visible (race). As *Negerhosen2000* walks through European towns, streets, and parks in his embellished form-fitting Lederhosen, interacting with those he meets, he appears to be known, yet his skin color conveys a certain "unknown," a certain "being out of place";³¹ what better place for the dandy/flâneur to exist than the liminal space of conspicuous incomprehensibility. What the bold performative strategies share is the perception of a racialized identity based on what is visible and marked on the body. These performance strategies demand a direct engagement with and participation from

those looking and making meaning and show us that skin is a palimpsest through which "race" is both read and misread.

In appropriating a traditional male Bavarian *tracht* typically called lederhosen and ubiquitously understood as singularly German, Désert in *Negerhosen2000* is heir to the "first-world" *observateur* that is Baudelaire's flâneur and Allende's fictitious sartorial splendor characterized by "third-world" Zacharie.³² As the man who moves about town, chronicling his surroundings, *Negerhosen2000*'s presence, like Zacharie's, is suspect and out of place—because of his skin color as well as for his adornment of a nonblack cultural tradition. Similar to Zacharie, *Negerhosen2000* is engaged in the performative and the power to play with the presentation of self, a machination in the black diaspora that ensures survival in a hostile world. It is Désert's implicit indifference to inquiring stares and his self-fashioning that brings to mind the "urban idler and habitual witness" of the flâneur and his counterpart, the conspicuously attired dandy.³³ *Negerhosen2000*'s *flânerie* becomes an expansive way to express a black, postmodern, and mobile body politics, a body that at one time had been threatened because of its black and queer visibility. Conversely, it is through his mobility that we can understand Désert's postmodern flâneur as a traveling performance of artful representation, contradictions, and demystifying myths.



Left: Figure 1. Jean-Ulrick Désert, from *Negerhosen2000 / The Travel Albums (Venedig)*, 2007. DIN A4 format; unique imaginary postcard digital print and collage with pigmented inks on decorative cut archival paper. Courtesy of the artist and Espace d'Art Contemporain 14°N 61°W Martinique FWI



Right: Figure 2. Jean-Ulrick Désert, from *Negerhosen2000 / The Travel Albums (DocumentaX)*, 2007. DIN A4 format; unique imaginary postcard digital print and collage with pigmented inks on decorative cut archival paper. Courtesy of the artist and Espace d'Art Contemporain 14°N 61°W Martinique FWI

Using quare vernacular aesthetics as a performative stratagem of survival in a charged environment, Désert constitutes *Negerhosen2000* not simply as a dandy or a flaneur but as a black quare dandy/flaneur who in his affected presence does not distance himself from observation or recoil from encounter. In other words, we recognize *Negerhosen2000* as having a quare aesthetic not simply because of his sartorial splendor and spectacularity, but because his subversive black presence inherently destabilizes the social, spatial, and racial matrix that governs specific white European spaces, that is, Germany.³⁴

What would it look like if we explore black cultural formations outside and beyond the narrow confines of traditional locations for black people? With her outstanding research on the historical presence of Africans and African Americans in Germany, Tina Campt reminds us that “diaspora cannot be seen as a historically given or universally applicable analytic model for explaining

the cultural and community formations of all black populations.”³⁵ Moreover, the narrative of the Middle Passage or the triangular slave trade is not the only lens of analysis for a discussion of the formation of black communities outside of Africa. *Désert* allows us to explore the presence of black people, of Caribbean people in nontraditional places of settlement not limited to North American countries and European nations and thus expands our understanding of the African diaspora as not being limited to the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and, most recently, Italy.

Creole Intimacies: *L'ABCdaire de ma vie privée*

In the ink, watercolor, and pencil drawings of *L'ABCdaire*, historic symbols, personal mementoes, and deft spatial arrangements reflect the historical and cultural relations shared by its occupants. *Désert* constructs these “self-portraits” by combining letters of the alphabet and French, Kreyol, English, and German words that begin with that letter, along with images that have historical and personal significance. While not self-portraits in the conventional sense, which often provide a realistic or idealized image of the artist, these drawings on velum are pregnant with meaning. They address the emotional experiences of migration, belonging, and language through carefully rendered, allegorical images, offering an unconventional way of representing self. As such, these “self-portraits” are snapshots of specific moments of life and cultural circumstances.³⁶ The effectiveness of the drawings resides in the precise combination and conceptual layering of images, in seemingly random positions, and text that narrates a story of transnationalism and multilingual mappings. The drawings are simultaneously poetic and powerful, uniting the personal and conceptual nature of memory to the visual elements of drawing.



L'ABCdaire foregrounds the relationship between simple words and their complex meanings. These relationships are not to be read literally; rather, they function as an intimation to a larger visual narrative that takes shape through fragmented trajectories and compositional space. For Désert, “each plate designates a letter and a series of associative words in the language of ‘home.’”³⁷ Drawn in a large, bold, black font, the capital letter *A* features the word *arrestation*, alluding to the treatment of opponents of the brutal and heinous presidencies of François Duvalier (1957–71) and Jean-Claude Duvalier (1971–86). The terror of the Duvalier regimes led to complex cultural and familial ruptures, with many seeking the *aéroport* (airport) and eventually *abandonner* (abandonment).³⁸ Looming monumentally on the horizon next to the image of Désert’s father are the national symbols of anxiety and state power: the Palais Nationale in Port-au-Prince and the Haitian coat of arms (fig. 3).³⁹ The letter *B* brings us to Brooklyn, one of the largest foreign enclaves for Haitians. This part of Désert’s journey was when he first realized that he had “become black” and “foreign”; he began to contemplate the connotations and perceptions associated with such racial and national labels. Remembering that moment of discovery, he states, “I became *negro* and *colored*, an undesirable trait, redeemed only by my ‘frenchy-ness,’ which rendered me an exotic, like a caged bird. I did not feel oppressed but rather . . . bewildered” (fig. 4).⁴⁰ The letter *C* takes us to the *capitale*, Paris. We are privy to an intimate dialogue occurring between the images in soft, simple shades of black, red, and blue, as well as a dialogue between the young Haitian Kreyol military father and the younger Haitian American French transnational son. This is an intimate conversation, possibly spoken in Kreyol under the Eiffel Tower in Paris (fig. 5). With the letter *D*, we arrive in Germany, the current place of Désert’s transnational journey (fig. 6).



Underneath the images, Désert has drawn precisely spaced, fine lines to mimic the rectangular-shaped notebook pages that he used as a child in Haiti. In these drawings, Désert’s meticulous architectural training combines with the measured and systematic language of images. For Désert the series recalls the Dick-and-Jane-like primers with which he was taught to read English when he arrived in New York.⁴¹ While Dick, Jane, Mother, Father, baby sister Sally, and Spot the dog characterize the ideal American nuclear family, these images of whiteness never seemed *real* to Désert. Indeed, growing up in Haiti, people were never that white (Haitian *whiteness* was always touched with *m’palé Kreyòl*), never that pure or pristine, never that ideal, and no one was ever named “Dick” or “Jane.”⁴² The French words and fine lines drawn on the rectangular-shaped page, like a map, allow us to follow the experiences that span the fraught yet delicate connections between the pleasures of diaspora and the discontent of migration. Following W. J. T. Mitchell, these images entice the viewer as “metapictures” because of what they tell us about personal history and language. There is palpable electricity between the images and the words, between the feelings evoked by the words and the particular events captured in the drawings. There is also fastidiousness to the composition; it includes telling images and words that reveal, in a singularly beautiful style, an intimate story of diaspora.

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Left: Figure 3. Jean-Ulrick Désert, “A,” *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, 2005. Inks, pencil, and watercolor on vellum paper; DIN A3, 297 x 420 mm. Goldrich Collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist

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Right: Figure 4. Jean-Ulrick Désert, “B,” *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, 2005. Inks, pencil, and watercolor on vellum paper; DIN A3, 297 x 420 mm. Goldrich Collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Left: Figure 5. Jean-Ulrick Désert, “C,” *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, 2005. Inks, pencil, and watercolor on vellum paper; DIN A3, 297 x 420 mm. Goldrich Collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Right: Figure 6. Jean-Ulrick Désert, “D,” *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, 2005. Inks, pencil, and watercolor on vellum paper; DIN A3, 297 x 420 mm. Goldrich Collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Embarking for the first time on autobiographical work and drawing on an archive of personal images and memories, *L'ABCdaire* speaks to the fluidity of diasporic subjects and creates its own lingua franca, a “visual multilingualism,” that blends Kreyol, French, German, and English elements that reveal the centrality of language and visual memory to the formation of cultural identities. *L'ABCdaire* illustrates that for Haitians, living *endezo* requires a strategic negotiation with the powers that reside in language, cultural differences, and rights to residency. We can think of *endezo* as a liminal space, one that transcends the fixed specificity of location; a place created at the interstices of being. It is precisely at the nexus of a protean, transnational diasporic black Caribbean identity—the product of a range of cross-cultural influences and temporalities—that one is able to experience the formidable space of *endezo* and the transformative nature of black queer identity that is shaped by the politics of resistance and matured in the struggle for self and survival. In these works, Désert’s diasporic body “becomes an archive of multiple displacements and colonial histories and migration.”⁴³ Indeed, Désert’s “self-portraits” are profound musings between the transparent realities that are drawn on the page and the faint shadows that are left in their wake. They are in keeping with the imperceptibility that constitutes, in part, abstract art and non-conventional forms of self-portraiture.

The Intimacy of the Conceptual

How are the aesthetic and conceptual language of queer bodies lived in ways that create a profound space within the viscosity of the material? How can alternative modes of presentation be transformative in public spaces yet in many ways remain private? What are we to make of the relations between art, religion, and sexual identity?? These are some of the questions his most recent text-based installation, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* asks. Entering a dimly lit interior space, the viewer is greeted by five garlands of various vibrant colors that hang from the ceiling. Each garland, in one of five different creole languages—Haitian Kreyol, Jamaican patois, Surinamese Sranan Tongo, Curaçaoan Papiamentu, and Dominican Spanish—spells out the biblical passage “*Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*,” loosely translated in English as “Do not throw pearls before swine,” taken from the New Testament.⁴⁴ In this most recent conceptual art piece, Désert revisits the intimacy of language and what it evokes, a strategy that he had explored in *L'ABCdaire*. Both works demand that we consider, first, the place of the personal and the autobiographical in the production of a queer subjectivity and, second, the specific and the local(e) in this production. In two recent installments of *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, one in Belfast and the other in Glasgow, colored garlands hang from the gallery ceiling, surrounded by pearlescent balloons attached to the ceiling by silver chains (figs. 7 and 8). The viewer is challenged to contemplate the religiosity emitted by the interplay between text and meaning while consuming the materiality of the work and its conditions of display.

Rather than an overt denunciation of the recently hateful religiosity of the Caribbean on same-sex-loving people and the violence and discrimination faced by these individuals, this installation is undergirded



Figure 7. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, 2016. Installation of laser cut pvc biblical text garlands, acrylic paints, pearlescent balloons, and metal chains; variable dimensions. Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland, 2017 installation; courtesy of the artist and *Small Axe*, with the support of the British Council and Warhol Foundation grant. Photograph courtesy of the artist



Figure 8. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, 2016. Installation of laser cut pvc biblical text garlands, acrylic paints, pearlescent balloons, and metal chains; variable dimensions. Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland, 2017 installation; courtesy of the artist and Small Axe, with the support of the British Council and Warhol Foundation grant. Photograph courtesy of the artist

by the possibility that in the intuitiveness of conceptual art—in its ability to be free of and wholly independent on the art object and depending instead on the “objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator”⁴⁵—such an exercise gestures toward the textured intimacy of language as it plays an important role in the formation of subjectivity. Using the Bible verse in five creole languages, generously translated by friends who are native speakers, Désert has moved away from the colonized language of French and imbued this festive-looking art piece with the languages of the people (*pèp*), those who struggle every day to challenge the coercion, homophobia, and supremacy of religious fundamentalism that has been plaguing the Caribbean.⁴⁶ His employment of creole languages is a “paradigmatic aesthetic,” one that “grapples with the politics of colonization,” “enunciates itself as differen[t]” (yet recognizable), and “gives the word back” to the people, those who claim and embrace a queer local/identity that exists within a nexus of ideas, languages, and performances. “Such an engagement of language” is not an exercise in futility or a “frivolous exhibition”; it is instead “linked to a complicated and undeniable commitment” to subjectivity.⁴⁷ For it is not simply the words themselves that challenge but the meanings those words derive and make clear, a fundamental aesthetic tenet of conceptual art.

In *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* we see a consideration of subjectivity, agency, and power. We see the shift in the currency of certain languages as a matter of fact and their manipulation as a matter of self-preservation. Simultaneously, the words evoke the fragility of positions that are seemingly understood as precious but are understood as not being able to be comprehended by everyone. It is in their indecipherability (by some) that we are allowed to see the intimacy that comes from a shared linguistic positionality.

In conceptual art, the idea or concept takes precedence over the material aspect of the art. In his famous essay “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” artist Sol LeWitt writes, “In conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. . . . The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”⁴⁸ It is the idea that drives the final piece; it is the idea that is the art: “By marking a point where the idea becomes the thing of art, conceptual art widen[s] the parameters of what [can] potentially be understood as art.”⁴⁹ It also marks a moment that artists can look outside the more formal parameters of the art historical canon to create a radical art moment.⁵⁰ While complex in its significance, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* does not adhere to a particular form and dimension, but is that not the beauty and power of conceptual art? Instead, its formal elements: color, dimension, line, and shape overflow in its complex structuring of language, foregrounding its deeply seductive meaning. Although lacking the performative and visuality of *Negerhosen2000* and *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, Désert’s *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* need not be complex in its form. According to LeWitt, “Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable.”⁵¹

The intimate space of creole, where black and brown queer Caribbean bodies refuse to be *out of place* and refuse to *stay in place*, is a radical moment, producing work that offers conceptual and real resistance to the vulnerabilities of black queer migrating bodies that are often subject to violence, sanctioned by the state or imposed by individuals. Jean-Ulrick Désert’s methodically composed drawings, evocative performative photographic pieces, and photographic performative pieces and installations examine the body (and its conspicuous absence) at the nexus of self-representation. To suggest, for example, that Désert’s aesthetics insights stem simply from his black Caribbean identity would be limiting; it would fall into what Kobena Mercer calls “biographical reductionism.”⁵² What might prove to be more fruitful would be to frame Désert’s insights within a larger transnational context and conceptualize his insights as possibilities for translations and transformations of the self while producing alternative cartographies that incorporate the coexistence of multiple languages and convergent histories into the formation of black diasporic identities. Désert’s work offers generative possibilities to engage with the creative strategies of sartorial play and performative black bodies as they reformulate themselves in elegantly drawn images using provocative language while employing strategies of Conceptual art that foregrounds the relations between language and meaning and the dematerialization of the art object.

Endnotes

- 1 Isabel Allende, *Island beneath the Sea*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2010), 214.
- 2 Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 63.
- 3 Allende, *Island beneath the Sea*, 343.
- 4 Ibid., 430.
- 5 Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 25 (emphasis mine).
- 6 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 120.
- 7 Mary Gluck, “The *Flâneur* and the Aesthetic Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 20, no. 5 (2003): 59–61.
- 8 E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Leaned from My Grandmother,” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 135. Johnson’s position of *quare* as oppose to *queer* is one that includes race and class in its analysis and critique and moves it away from a simple sexual definition. Elsewhere, I detail the textual engagement of *Negerhosen2000*, Désert’s ongoing performance piece, which was first presented in 1997 at *documenta X*. See Jerry Philogène, “Meditations on Traveling Diasporically: Jean-Ulrick Désert and *Negerhosen2000*,” *Radical History Review*, no. 115 (Winter 2013): 184–93.
- 9 Julia Alvarez, quoted in Ilan Stavans, “Las Mariposas,” *Nation*, 7 November 1994, 552–56. Alvarez is a Dominican American writer.
- 10 “ABCdaire” is taken from a title of a popular book series of “how-to” guides from the publishing house Flammarion in Paris..
- 11 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 37.
- 12 Loosely translated from Haitian Kreyol, *endezo* means “in between two waters.” See Andre Juste’s use of the word in discussing the work of Vladimir Cybil: Andre Juste, “Romancing the National: Contextualizing the art of Vladimir Cybil,” December 1999, www2.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti-archive/msg01945.html. On the “in-between,” see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.
- 13 Svetlana Boym, “On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov’s Installations and Immigrant Homes,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 500.
- 14 Valerie Cassel Oliver, “Through the Conceptual Lens: The Rise, Fall, and

- Resurrection of Blackness,” in Valerie Cassel Oliver et al., *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2005), 18.
- 15 Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 127.
- 16 Ibid., 126, 127.
- 17 Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.
- 18 I utilize performance as a site of political engagement and as site of resistance. Useful in my understanding of performance and subjectivity is José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). I employ *queer* in the way that Johnson does, infusing the term with an African American “twist,” extending and enhancing its political and identitarian resistance strategies and not limiting it to same-sex sexual desires. The quote by Antonio Benítez-Rojo used as an epigraph at the start of this essay is found in Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*, 77.
- 19 Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 127. Johnson’s conception of *quare* as opposed to *queer* is one that includes race and class in its analysis and critique and moves it away from simply a sexual definition. For a multidimensional discussion of black queer studies, see Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*; Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies”; and Rinaldo Walcott, “Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory,” in “Blackness and Sexualities,” ed. Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schuhmann, special issue, *Forum for European Contributions for African American Studies* 16 (2007): 29–40.
- 20 Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 126.
- 21 Jerry Philogene, “Lenelle Moise: Postscript, Swimming in the Waters of *Endezo*,” in “Haiti in a Globalized Frame,” special issue, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 19, no. 3 (2015): 336.
- 22 Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ* 14, nos. 2–3 (2008): 192.
- 23 Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press) 2010, 6.
- 24 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1995).
- 25 Benjamin committed suicide before finishing his thirteen-year project, *The Arcades Project*. For a discussion on Benjamin’s notion of the flâneur, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Sven Birkerts, “Walter Benjamin, *Flâneur*: A *Flânerie*,” *Iowa Review* 13, nos. 3–4 (1983), 164–79; Tom McDonough, “The Crimes of the *Flâneur*,” *October*, no. 102 (Autumn 2002): 101–22; and Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flânerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 26 Gregory Shaya, “The *Flâneur*, the *Badaud*, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860–1910,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (2004): 41–77.
- 27 For Baudelaire, this spectator was resolutely male and heterosexual.
- 28 For a discussion of the various racial and sexual manifestations of the dandy, see Richard J. Powell, “Sartor Africanus,” in Susan Fillin-Yeh, ed., *Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 217–42; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1995); Elisa F. Glick, “The Dialectics of Dandyism,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 48 (Spring 2001): 129–63; Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Elisa F. Glick, “Harlem’s Queer

Dandy: African American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 3 (2003): 414–42; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Barbara L. Webb, “The Black Dandyism of George Walker: A Case Study in Genealogical Methods,” *TDR* 45, no. 4 (2001): 7–24. For a discussion on the *flâneuse*, see Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible Flâneur,” *New Left Review*, September–October 1992, 90–110; Janet Wolff, “The ‘Invisible’ Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 37–48, and “Gender and the Haunting of Cities (or, the Retirement of the Flâneur),” in Aruna d’Souza and Tom McDonough, eds., *The Invisible flâneuse? Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 18–31; and Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity, and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 70–127.

- 29 Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NC: Princeton University Press, 1998), 1–45.
- 30 Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6. Sadly, the history of brown and black people is rife with stories about physical violence because of race, sexuality, or gender or a combination of all three. We cannot forget the images and stories of Emmett Till (1955), Abner Louima (1997), and James Craig Anderson (2011), as well as, more recently, Trayvon Martin, a black teenager fatally shot in 2012 in Sanford, Florida, by George Zimmerman, a self-described Hispanic American man, because Trayvon “looked suspicious” and was “walking where he did not belong.”
- 31 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 21.
- 32 A *tracht* is a culturally specific, traditional apparel. Lederhosen, oftentimes made of suede and worn during physical activities, is an outfit mostly associated with working-class folk culture, as folkswear, in Bavarian culture.
- 33 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 72.
- 34 For a comprehensive history of Africans in Germany and Afro-German culture, see Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay, ed., *The African-German Experience: Critical Essays* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); Tina Campt, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), and *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, eds., *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Sander L. Gilman, *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982); Patricia Mazón and Reinhild Steingröver, eds., *Not So Plain as Black and White: Afro-German Culture and History, 1890–2000*, with foreword by Russell Berman (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005); Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schuhmann, eds., “Blackness and Sexualities,” special issue, *Forum for European Contributions for African American Studies* 16 (2007); Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, edited by Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); and *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* edited by Heike Raphael-Hernandez with a forward by Paul Gilroy, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).
- 35 Tina M. Campt, “Family Matters: Diaspora, Difference, and the Visual Archives,” *Social Text*, no. 98 (Spring 2009): 87.
- 36 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 76.
- 37 Jean-Ulrick Désert, e-mail to the author, 27 August 2006.
- 38 Désert and his parents came to New York in 1968.

- 39 The 12 January 2010 earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince and its surrounding provinces destroyed the Palais Nationale. At the writing of this essay, a date to rebuild it has not been confirmed.
- 40 Jean-Ulrick Désert, "Queer Space," in Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, eds., *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 17–26.
- 41 Here we can draw similarities to an aesthetic literary device used by Toni Morrison in her majestic *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Morrison begins the novel with words from the Dick and Jane elementary school reading primer used in the 1940s. As the story progresses, Morrison repeats the introductory lines from the primer, first without punctuation and capitalization, then without spacing between the words, bleeding them together, with no linguistic alignment, suggesting chaos and dysfunction, which mirrors the story that follows, one of unimaginable sadness, dehumanization, disillusionment, pain, and fear. In addition, *L'ABCdaire* participates in the tradition of artists' books and photo-text projects that facilitate the exploration of language, history, and cultural memory as instrumental elements in identity formation.
- 42 Loosely translated, *M'palé Kreyòl* means, "I speak Kreyol."
- 43 Gayatri Gopinath, "Archives, Affect, and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-Visions," www.chitraganesh.com/images/press/scholarly/Archive%20Affect%20Everyday.pdf, 166.
- 44 Matthew 7:6.
- 45 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 80.
- 46 The garlands read as follows: "Pa jété grenn pèl devan kochon" (Kreyol); "No tek unu gud gud porl dash gi pig" (patois); "Èn no trowe parekrara gi agu" (Sranan Tongo); "No ta tira perlanan dilanti e porkonan" (Papiamentu); and "No echen perlas a los puercos" (Dominican Spanish). Jean-Ulrick Désert, correspondence with the author, May 2016.
- 47 Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory (Un)Becoming the Subject* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 130.
- 48 LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," 81.
- 49 Franklin Sirmans, "An American Art Job," *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2005, Valerie Cassel Oliver, Terry Adkins, and Franklin Sirmans, contributors, 12.
- 50 For example, Marcel Duchamp's infamous *Fountain*, a pissoir exhibited at the American Society for Independent Artists in 1917. Its cool porcelain presence mounted on a pedestal set the stage for an art practice that opened its doors to the provocation of pastiche and the precarious humor of intimacy as well as the precarious intimacy of sheer ordinariness. Four year before that, Duchamp's ready-made *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) provoked outrage, creating the space for the radical moment that would usher in this new modernist tradition.
- 51 LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," 82.
- 52 Kobena Mercer, "Hew Locke's Postcolonial Baroque," *Small Axe*, no. 34 (March 2011): 10.