taking one last breath, catching one last glimpse


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*L’étoile absinthe* (*The Absinthe Star*) begins with an image of the Caribbean sun—this infra-rouge mass floats in the sky like a large bird, circling the *potomitan*.\(^1\) Readers of the novel will immediately notice a patch of text on the very first page is missing, as though time were slowly eating away at the final distinguishable traces of Alexis left after he was murdered under the reign of François Duvalier.\(^2\) With this final and incomplete novel, written between 1959 and 1961, readers and critics will be forced to reckon with not only the object of the novel, but also the artist’s vision for the proposed tetralogy of which it was originally a part.

In an interview with Radio France Internationale in March 2017, Florence Alexis, Jacques Stephen Alexis’s daughter, explained that *L’étoile absinthe* was sent to her by her father’s friends—along with *Le léopard*, a short poetic fragment that features traces of the animalistic and natural themes of the novel—as she was reissuing his other works with the Parisian publishing house Gallimard.\(^3\) Aware of the novel’s existence, or at least the idea of it, Florence explained that her father, during various interviews after the publication of *L’espace d’un cillement* (*In the Flicker of an Eyelid*) in 1959, had outlined his plans for a tetralogy that would follow L’églantine, *L’étoile absinthe*’s main character. This cycle of novels would track the various life stages of L’églantine as she sought to define her existence outside of the confines of the “Sensation Bar,” where she worked as a prostitute.

*L’étoile absinthe* takes place nearly ten years prior to *L’espace d’un cillement*, with L’églantine in a taxi rolling through the streets of Port-au-Prince on her way to a boarding house. As L’églantine looks out the window of the taxi, the images of the city flash by: “Each house seized by the velocity of the car, dislocated, projected and drowned in the obscurity of the eyes is a second that will never be recovered. Each instant makes its act of saying goodbye even more irreversible” (10).\(^4\) Once she arrives at the boarding house, L’églantine is determined to “make another silhouette for herself, adopt a new allure, sculpt herself a new figure, to recreate herself entirely, and then, especially, to find an occupation,” perhaps “a little business, something to buy, and later resell” (22).\(^5\) It is at this point that L’églantine meets Célie Chéry, who convinces her to invest in the salt industry.

The two charter and board the *Dieu-Premier*, departing from Port-au-Prince to prospect their new business venture in Grande Saline. Fleeting images of the Haitian capital blend with the Caribbean sky as Alexis begins to weave together the human and natural realms: “The red and blue lights of the semaphore in the distance burn like the stars, then the tall superstructure of woven steel slowly lowered. The city disappeared” (43).\(^6\) As the
Dieu-Premier navigates the high seas, its captain and crew making adjustments throughout the night, a storm comes on. What follows is a harrowing, apocalyptic episode in which the two women and the ship’s crew are thrust to the end of humanity as the forces of nature thrash the Dieu-Premier.

The ocean pulses, enticing the ship to join in a sensual, lubricious vodouisant dance. Captivated by the scene, L’églande is left in a trance, noticing “the strangeness of the universe! The strangeness of human gesticulations, the strangeness of blood in the veins, saliva, sweat, air in the lungs, the eruption of sexual humors, the bizarre electricity of nerves, the diabolic divinity of the animalistic beauty of bodies” (58). After L’églande takes to the cabin with the other sailors, the crew begins to call on the Iwas for protection, particularly Agouet’Arroyo, the Vodou god of the sea. Against the will of the captain, the passengers and crew continue to chant, calling on Agouet’Arroyo to calm the storm and ferry them to safety. Once the storm has subsided, the passengers and crew land on the shore of an island, welcomed by the humming of a Rara band in the distance. The action, just like the music, slowly begins to fade away as the crew repairs the ship in preparation to leave the island and resume their journey. Left unfinished, L’étoile absinthe trails off, its readers lulled by the poetic of Alexis’s prose.

L’étoile absinthe possesses a lyricism throughout the text: whether the characters are at sea, on the shore, or in the hustle and bustle of Port-au-Prince, there is always a vodouisant element, phrases in Haitian Creole or Spanish, or the captivating presence of Rara music. In this fragmented novel, Jacques Stephen Alexis creates a mystical world, granting us one more glimpse of this Caribbean constellation—the world of La Niña Estrellita and the spiritual presence of Vodou—that dots the night sky in the calm after the storm. As with other works by Alexis, readers of L’étoile absinthe are best suited to follow Florence Alexis’s wise advice in her preface to L’espace d’un cîlement: “Let us listen to the sharpness of each one of [his] words, each one of them explosive since [his] voice was silenced much too quickly.”

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1 The potomitan, literally “center pole” in Haitian Creole, refers to the central pillar in a place of Vodou worship. The centrifugal movement around the potomitan in Vodou ceremonies is a recurrent motif in L’Étoile absinthe. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2 Jacques Stephen Alexis was a Haitian novelist, journalist, and political activist. His works apart from L’étoile absinthe include Compère Général Soleil (1955) (General Sun, My Brother, trans. Carrol Coates, 1999); Les arbres musiciens (1957); L’espace d’un cîlement (1959) (In the Flicker of an Eyelid, trans. Carrol Coates and
Edwidge Danticat, 2002); and Romancero aux étoiles (1960). Alexis was killed in April 1961, following a failed coup d'état attempting to overthrow the Haitian dictator François Duvalier.


4 “Chaque maison que la vitesse saisit, désarticule, projette et noie dans l’arcane des yeux est une seconde qui ne sera jamais plus retrouvée. Chaque instant fait de son adieu un acte plus irréversible.”

5 “Créer une autre silhouette, adopter une autre allure, se sculpter un nouveau visage, se refaçonner tout entière et puis, surtout, chercher une occupation”; “un petit négoce, quelque chose à acheter, à revendre.”

6 “Les feux rouges et bleus du sémaphore au loin brûlent comme des astres, puis la haute superstructure d’acier ajouté s’abaisse lentement. La ville a disparu.”

7 “Étrangeté de l’univers! Étrangeté de la gesticulation humaine, étrangeté du sang dans les veines, la salive, la sueur, l’air dans le poumon, ce giclement terrifiant des humeurs sexuelles, la bizarre électricité des nerfs, divinité diabolique de la beauté animale des corps.”


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