

Equivocally Jewish: Claude Cahun and the Narratives of Modern Art

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Claude Cahun (b. Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob) was rediscovered and recognized as an important woman Surrealist when six of her photographs appeared in the 1986 exhibition *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*, curated by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston. As virtually nothing was known about her at the time, Cahun's entry in the biography section of the exhibition catalogue listed her date and place of birth and death as unknown and erroneously stated that she was deported to, and died in a concentration camp. While her photographs have garnered critical attention in the past three decades, she remains an under-represented figure both in the context of avant-garde art practice in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, and as an artist and writer more generally. What is more, virtually no critical scholarship exists with regard to Claude Cahun's sense of her Jewish identity, and how this figured in her artistic output, which consisted of not only photography but also experimental writing and what we would now term performance art.

Since the 1990s, the relatively small amount of literature on Cahun's work has been framed by the post-structuralist feminist debates of that decade. Cahun's body of photographic work attracted the focus of interest of feminists at that time, as it seemed to illustrate the then prevalent concept of fractured subjectivity, of a decentred subject. As Lucy Lippard rightly points out, had Cahun been rediscovered in the 1970s, the

discussion around her work would have been quite different.¹ What was of most interest to feminists concerned with questions of identity in the late 1980s and 1990s was what were taken to be Cahun's photographic self-portraits dating from the 1920s and 1930s. Consequently, little attention has been paid to her written and non-figurative photographic work or her political activism.

Discussions of those works by Claude Cahun that were identified as photographic 'self-portraits' contend that her work interrogates any notion of a stable subject position through autobiographical enquiry, since, as both subject and object of the images, Cahun performs a series of both male and female personae to illustrate aspects of her 'self'. It has been argued that through these multiple self-representations, Claude Cahun presents the self as nothing but a series of constructions, and takes her own subjectivity as a means of revealing the impossibility of a fixed or static self. Although she continued to photograph herself throughout her life, it is primarily the photo-portraits of the 1920s and early 1930s that are taken to anticipate much of postmodern theory. With their focus on the face and body, they appear to confirm the arguments of Judith Butler that identity is mutable, performed and contingent upon socially understood norms. These theories support much of how Claude Cahun's work is currently understood and raise relevant concerns. Yet, in a significant way they fail to recognize the complexities of her work and art practice within its own historical and political moment.

Cahun's work is exceptional as surrealist photography, since photography was an unlikely medium for surrealist artists who wanted to explore "the intensely illogical

¹ Lippard, Lucy R. "Scattering Selves." Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman. Ed. Shelley Rice. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998 : 36

reality of the dream.” Traditional criticism has viewed Surrealist photography as a pale imitation of authentic Surrealist work. The assumption has been that photography, a "realistic" medium, is fundamentally incompatible with a cause devoted to the wildly subjective, the world of dreams and the unconscious. As a consequence, Surrealist photography, a major body of 20-century art, has remained largely unexplored until relatively recently. What is more, women had at best an ambivalent relationship to the movement.

Considered primarily as fulfilling traditional roles as models, mistresses and muses, women were not included in the official Surrealist group until the 1930s. More often than not, women were seen as muses and not as artists in their own right. It was women's bodies, usually white & nude, that served as the basis for surrealist word play and juxtapositions. Women's bodies as 'others' were used to disrupt the rational order and as models, mistresses, and muses, women were the vehicle for surrealist games and the "marvelous" replacement of another reality

Women were active producers of art and did contribute to the Surrealist movement, however. Beginning in Paris in the 1920s, women poets, essayists, painters, and artists in other media have actively collaborated in defining and refining surrealism's basic project—achieving a higher, open, and dynamic consciousness, from which no aspect of the real or the imaginary is rejected. Indeed, few artistic or social movements can boast as many women forebears, founders, and participants. Yet outside the movement, women's contributions to surrealism have been largely ignored or simply unknown.

The importance of the current literature on Claude Cahun is that it notes the fact that she seemed to use her art to disrupt ideas about gender, social identity and femininity that were too restrictive for her in the context of France in the 1920s and 1930s. But what about considering Claude Cahun's relationship to her Jewish background? Surely, choosing an overtly Jewish pseudonym c. 1915-1916 merits consideration. Claude Cahun was born into a prominent intellectual Jewish family of writers and publishers in Nantes, France. Her Uncle, Marcel Schwob, was a famous symbolist writer and friend of Oscar Wilde. Her father, Maurice Schwob, edited and published a well-known regional newspaper. Her great-uncle David Léon Cahun (1841-1900) was a well-known Orientalist and political writer who published articles about Egypt and surrounding areas in the *Revue Française*. These travel writings about the Middle East were the first of their kind to be published in the popular media in France in the late 19th century. David Léon Cahun also published a highly respected study of Jewish Life and Customs in Alsace. When Claude Cahun wrote about her choice to self-name, she said "I always used a pseudonym to write, the name of my obscure Jewish relatives (Cahun) with whom I felt more affinity."²

The reference here is no doubt to Claude Cahun's paternal grandmother, Mathilde Cahun (Schwob) who raised her from the time she was a young child after her mother Marie Victorine Courbebaisse was institutionalized. Although not Halachically Jewish since she was born to a non-Jewish mother, Cahun effectively considered Mathilde

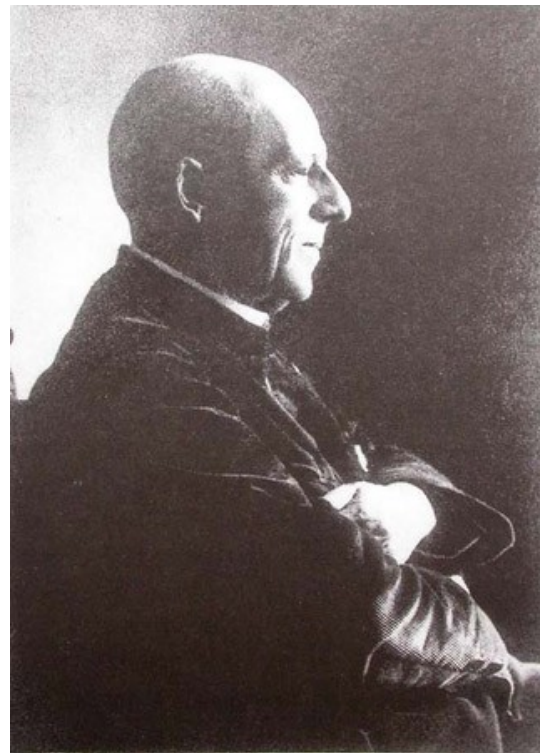
² Lettre a Paul Levy (p. 711) "Vouz verrez par ailleurs dans cette letter, que je ne m'accroche nullement à la memoire de mon pere—pas plus qu'à celle de Marcel Schwob: j'ai toujours porté un pseudonyme pour écrire, le nom d'obscurs parents juifs (Cahun) avec qui je me sentais plus d'affinités."

Cahun to be the maternal figure in her life and chose to self-identify as Jewish when she adopted Cahun as a pseudonym. Lucy Schwob never legally changed her name, and she continued to use her birth name throughout her life. But for her artist name, it is significant that Lucy Schwob settled on 'Cahun' for her professional endeavours, be they literary, visual, or theatrical. Deliberately choosing not to write under the name Schwob was an attempt to distance herself from her illustrious father and uncle. Yet she did not dissociate herself from her Jewish identity, but in fact underscored it. Considering that anti-Semitism was more prevalent in France at that time in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, this was a bold move. Writing to a friend in 1950, Lucy Schwob stated that she took the name of her 'obscure' Jewish relatives, in contrast to her more 'famous' Jewish relatives: her uncle, the renowned Symbolist writer Marcel Schwob, her father Maurice Schwob, and her grandfather Georges Schwob, who were prominent publishers in France and editors of *Le Phare de la Loire*. The distinction here was between 'obscure' and 'famous,' while the Jewishness remained constant. Moreover, she attested her greater affinity to the paternal side of her family, and especially the Cahun grandmother who raised her and who likely instilled her with a Jewish identity.

Claude Cahun used herself as both object and subject in her photographs, devoting her work to challenging popular notions of femininity and sexuality as they were depicted in both surrealism and the wider culture and also as they were embodied in many of the classicizing images of Aryan white female beauties. Cahun and her collaborative partner Marcel Moore (born Suzanne Malherbe, 1892-1972) often photographed Cahun with a shaved head (beginning as early as 1917), wearing men's clothes. The shifting notion of self or selves explored in Cahun /Moore's work included

their sexuality (lesbian), Cahun's religious origins (Jewish), and the pair's intellectual identifications (literary & philosophical).

A photograph by Cahun/Moore taken c. 1928 (the year Claude Cahun's father died) shows the artist, her hair cropped close to her head, dressed in a dark corduroy jacket & posed in profile. Light from the front illuminates her face. The portrait is a replication of a similar portrait of Cahun's father, Maurice Schwob, and clearly reveals the artist playing with identifications.



It is plausible that this portrait is inspired by the conventions of the profile portrait of Schwob and we can understand this as a self-conscious insertion by Cahun of her own image into the patrilineal, Jewish intellectual tradition with which she strongly identified. The relationship between these two photographs is one of a likeness. Both photographs

also conform to representational traditions that produce images of masculine power and intellectual force. Women are far less often depicted in profile in formal portraiture.

Cahun's photographs of herself and the photograph of her father also cross the boundary of ethnic (in this case Jewish) identity and representation. Here she places herself firmly within a tradition of intellectual profile portraits while at the same time suggesting a broader dialogue with representations of Jewishness as otherness in the 1920s. Representations of ethnicity in late 19th century & early 20th century photography were quickly appropriated to the perceived social function of photography as an apparatus of the state, frequently used to establish the typologies of social deviance (for example, the criminal, the degenerate, the homosexual, and by 1926 when this image was taken, the Jew). Photography "quickly came to establish and delineate the terrain of this *other*, to define both the generalized *look*—the typology and the *contingent instance* of the deviance and social pathology."³

Like her uncle Marcel Schwob, Claude Cahun saw herself as primarily a writer. It is in her writing that we get a sense of the interrelated importance of gender and ethnicity for understanding this artist's works. It is in her writing that readers can appreciate how crucial Cahun's sense of her Jewish identity also is to her artistic project. Like Marcel Schwob did in *Vies Imaginaires* (1896), Claude Cahun rewrote the narratives of a variety of personae. In 1925 Cahun published a series of monologues based on women whose stories were recounted in fairy tales, classical Greek Myths, and the Hebrew Bible. Cahun re-wrote the stories of Delilah, Judith and Salome, among others.

³ Allan Sekula quoted in Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) p. 41.

From the age of four, her paternal grandmother, Mathilde Cahun, raised young Lucy Schwob (a.k.a. Claude Cahun) after her parents divorced. Her father Maurice was an assimilated Jew and her mother, Marie-Antoinette Courbebaisse, was from a family of anti-Dreyfus Catholics.⁴ Although Claude Cahun's father was presumably a non-practicing Jew, or at least modern and secular, she likely encountered Jewish texts, cultural traditions and religious ceremonies while living with her grandmother. Her uncle, Leopold Schwob, was a rabbi in Rouen.⁵

Given that Claude Cahun was likely familiar with some Jewish liturgy, including the Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur services, which even a secular Jew might have been exposed to, I believe there is a relationship between the title of her book, *Aveux non Avenus* (alternately translated as "Confessions null and void" or "Disavowals") and the Kol Nidre prayer. Kol Nidre is the introductory prayer for the evening service of Yom Kippur, and the name is given to the whole service, highlighting its importance. Literally, Kol Nidre translates into French as "*tous les vœux*". The Kol Nidre prayer ends with the words in Hebrew "*Nidrenu lo Nidre,*" translated as "Our vows (to God) shall not be vows".

All personal vows we are likely to make, all personal oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our personal vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.

⁴ Colville, Georgiana M.M. "Self-Representation as Symptom: The Case of Claude Cahun" *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* eds. Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005: 274

⁵ Family tree viewed at the Jersey Archives, Jersey Heritage Trust <http://www.jerseyheritagetrust.org>

The near punning on *aveux/avenus* does indeed resonate with *Nidrenu/Nidre* (in addition to the negative between them), and the older meaning of ‘*aveux*’ is close semantically to a vow rather than a confession. The use of this title, with its potential relation to the *Kol Nidre* prayer, may also refer not only to her identity as a Jew but also as a lesbian, or her wish to identify as the so-called ‘third sex’.

Structured loosely into nine chapters that are cryptically titled with initials that suggest wordplay, and each beginning with photomontage composed in collaboration with her partner, the graphic artist Marcel Moore, the book appears to make an intervention into the genre of autobiography. The repetition of scenarios and the recurrence of characters lend the book sense of unity; however, the text offers no coherent narrative and Cahun rejects typical strategies in favour of experimental writing. The text is evidence of Cahun’s education, and assumes highly literate readership for the book is littered with references to literature, classical mythology, philosophy and scripture. It is also full of wordplay, colloquialisms and references to popular culture. Cahun uses language creatively and inventively, often for subversive effect. *Aveux non Avenus* is constructed around key themes including difference or otherness, going beyond gender, narcissism, individuality, and contains social critique and ruminations on art and poetry. It is the title of the book, however, that sets the agenda, for this is not straightforward autobiography. All ‘confessions’ are annulled or retracted. The enigmatic title suggests at the outset that any ‘truths’ are not to be taken as necessarily authentic, but rather as ‘cancelled confessions.’

As I have argued, it is conceivable that Cahun was making reference to the Jewish

Kol Nidre prayer, 'all vows are not vows,' given that the book contains multitude of references to the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament), and she has reworked Biblical stories and frequently inverts Biblical phrases throughout. Jewishness, which is addressed in the text, is something that has been largely neglected in the discourse about Claude Cahun.

As consequence of her denials, Cahun can be considered an unreliable narrator. From the outset and throughout the book, Cahun reveals that she is not interested in facts: 'Should I then burden myself with all the paraphernalia of facts, stones, cords delicately cut, precipices ... it doesn't interest me at all' (p.1); therefore, what follows is not revelatory. Truth is perpetually shunned in favour of an 'avowal of artifice' (p.26): 'As for "Truth", shall confess it to you? don't care about it in the least [...]' (p.65). As an unreliable narrator, Cahun is interested in style without authority. What the reader encounters in place of a confessional narrative, are fragmented texts and elliptical writing that remain opaque and difficult to make sense of. For the reader *Aveux non Avenus* is a game without rules.

In this game, Cahun uses the device of the unreliable narrator to demand participation on the part of the reader. The reader cannot read passively. The readers have to collude and their 'collaboration is indispensable.'⁶ Perhaps the postmodern reader is better equipped to undertake the journey with Claude Cahun through her collection of fragmented thoughts and imaginings than were her contemporaries. The book's publication had a limited impact when it was released in 1930 as an artist's book. Only 500 copies were printed, and writing in 1950, Cahun expressed disappointment with

⁶ Claude Cahun, *Écrits*, ed. Francois Leperlier (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 2002), p.770.

the work's initial reception by her peers: 'Ostracism was more or less the general response – aside from silence (ignored), [the book was met with] the basest of insults. Witness how "literary criticism" [...] received the "prose and poems" of this undesirable Cassandra".⁷ She lamented that her efforts to shake her contemporaries out of their *complacency* through the use of black humour and provocation were in vain.⁸ The unreliable narrator demands exactly this: that readers are not passive or complacent but rather actively engage and are open to the experimentation that saturates the pages of the text.

Certainly the 10 photomontages that illustrate this book and are composed using Cahun's now-familiar portraits must be considered in light of the text. Although the reader is cautioned against interpreting the text too literally, the writings may shed light on the portraits. One passage, titled '*I am in training, don't kiss me*' is written in English in the original and appeared emblazoned on Cahun's chest in a series of photographs c.1927. In the photographs, Cahun is costumed as a 'strong man' or circus performer. In the text, the suggestion is that (Cahun) is in training to prepare to face God:

I am in training, don't kiss me.

If ever it happens that I believe in a god outside myself, at certain times it seems to me that he has got the upper hand: having eternity before him. With his means at their disposal any murderer, innocent, prostitute, the bottom of their class, the lowest of men, could equal him, could easily topple him from his throne... yes, saved from the intolerable distractions of misery, love, illnesses, and at the same time allowed to take my time, I'd feel like his equal...

And maybe He wouldn't be much of a match for me, who knows?

[p. 185 from Chapter 9 I.O.U.]

⁷ Claude Cahun, 'Lettre à Paul Levy' reprinted in Claude Cahun, *Écrits*, p. 710.

⁸ Ibid.

Cahun's identifying as a Jew during the rise of Fascism and Nazism and concurrently at a time when there was a rise in anti-Semitism in France must be considered also in light of the more politically oriented images and objects she produced in the 1930s. Her shift away from introspective portraiture at this moment can be linked to the political climate of Europe in the 1930s as well as her increased political activeness in various left-leaning organizations. Cahun is rarely considered a political artist, yet this too is an aspect of her artistic output that should not be underestimated.

During the 1930s Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore participated in the *Contre-Attaque* group where she collaborated with writer Georges Bataille, among others. This was a radical group that Surrealist artists organized in response to the rise of Hitler and the spread of Fascism in France. Claude Cahun's commitment to radical politics and activism continued throughout her life. In 1937 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore moved from Paris to the Isle of Jersey in the English Channel, for as a Jew and a lesbian, Cahun and her partner felt it was unsafe to continue living in France. They had summered in Jersey as children and were familiar with the quiet island community. The Germans occupied Jersey in 1940, and it was here that the two women mobilized their art practice into one of resistance. Working as "*Der Soldat Ohne Name*" (The Soldier with No Name) the two women mounted a large-scale resistance campaign that included writing and distributing anti-Nazi leaflets. They distributed these leaflets and other anti-Nazi tracts inciting German soldiers to mutiny wearing a variety of disguises. They would write messages and rework poems on paper that they would then slip into Nazi officers coat pockets. They even snuck in to the officers' mess, which was located in a hotel across the street from their house. They also hung a banner in the neighbouring church

which read: “God is Great but Hitler is Greater! Jesus died for Man, but Men die for Hitler!” Both women were arrested, tried and sentenced to death for these acts. They were imprisoned for the last two years of the war, but were granted a reprieve at the last minute. German soldiers destroyed much of their artwork, including original photographs, photo-plates, and negatives.

Interest in the many features of Claude Cahun’s life and her work often hinges on the fact that she was one of the few women who actively engaged with surrealist artists in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Due to the limited amount of critical study devoted to Cahun as an artist who was self-consciously Jewish, many aspects of her work, including her political activism have been overlooked. Cahun’s work is of interest to feminist critics and scholars precisely because it has been assumed to be concerned with the question of self-representation, which is an issue of critical importance to contemporary feminist theory. Her frequent use of mask and masquerade has furthered these claims that Cahun presents the viewer with an unstable self that cannot be fixed or readily defined. However, her body of work must be considered in the political, social and historical context of the 1920s and 1930s.

Cahun is rarely viewed as a politicized artist even though she was involved in political organizations and made work that responded to the political climate of the time. Her work must be considered in the context in which it was created, and not solely as a prefiguration of current theories of female subjectivity that are of concern for feminist scholars today. Cahun’s interest was clearly on how the body is culturally and socially coded through clothing and hair. The visual tropes she employed must be linked to the

cultural, social, historical, and political climate of the 1920s and 1930s. Cahun and Moore's camera play is evidence of their acts. As they practiced it, photography was intimately tied to the subversive theatrics in which they engaged at in private, on stage, in the streets and underground throughout their productive lifespan together.