



Caribbean
Technopoe-
tics:
Episode 03
Ernesto
Ortega



CARIBBEAN TECHNO POETICS
EPISODE 03

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The following year, the Department decided to support the second

phase of the project, which focused on post-production of the interviews, subtitling, and the development of a web archive hosted on GitHub. The archive provides access to the complete bilingual episodes (English-Spanish), the posters designed to establish the visual identity of the video capsules, PDF editions in both English and Spanish, and links to access the podcast on YouTube and Spotify.

The publication and archive are part of an ongoing research project on Caribbean techno-poetics and seek to contribute to the documentation, circulation, and preservation of these



CARIBBEAN TECHNOPOETICS

Translation by Nicolás Gerardi Rousset

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EPISODE 03

ERNESTO OROZA
NICOLÁS GERARDI ROUSSET



CARIBBEAN TECHNO POETICS

EPISODE 03_ERNESTO OROZA

Conventions: titles of works and publications, personal names, and historical movements or events are set in italics; dates are set in bold. Speaker turns are marked NGR (Nicolas Gerardi Rousset) and EO (Eduardo Oroza). The text has been edited from the episode transcript: fillers, repetitions and false starts were removed, and names and facts corrected, while preserving the meaning and the voice of each speaker.

NGR: *Welcome to Caribbean Techno Poetics, a space dedicated to exploring the intersection between art, technology, and poetry. Today we're joined by Ernesto Oroza. Thank you so much for accepting the invitation – how are you, Ernesto? Good morning.*

EO: *Good morning to you, good afternoon to me. Thank you so much for the invitation, very happy to be here with you.*

NGR: *I'd like us to start with a small introduction – could you give a brief biography for the audience that isn't familiar with your work, about your path*

as an artist and researcher?

EO: Well, I'm Cuban, from Havana. I studied graphic design in the late eighties, early nineties in Havana, and then industrial design — two specializations somehow tied to design. I finished design school right as the economic crisis was deepening; really it's a crisis that had been building for forty or fifty years, but it deepens with the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, and my practice was marked profoundly by that situation, my own finances, my own life. Afterward I was researching the practices we developed at home —

Cubans in general were developing
— to confront that crisis.

I left Cuba in 2007 and went to the United States. I lived there fourteen years, in Miami — well, not Miami itself, but a city north of Miami called Aventura. I worked a lot, very intensely, in the city of Miami; it's a city I adore, I have many friends and interests there, and always very good memories. I never really missed Cuba — I developed a great attachment to the island, its literature, but I do miss Miami in a way. Now I live in France, in Saint-Étienne, a city with a very long industrial history — a mining city, originally built

around coal mines, later turned to arms production; during the 1914 war it was renamed Armeville, the city of weapons. There's a design school there, reformulated as a design school in the eighties, an art school where people used to graduate making decorative drawings, textile design — another of the local industries — and drawing rifle stocks and weapons. It gets reformulated once someone realizes the school had actually been doing design all along, in a way.

I've been connected to that school since 1998, when I was first invited. They later published two of my

books, around 2009 and 2014 — one of them, on *Rikimbili*, written with *Gean Moreno*, published here at the school, together with the city's school of architecture. I have a lot of friends there, a lot of affection for it, and they invited me back around 2019, though I arrived a month before COVID, to teach and to run an advanced-studies research department, where I worked for three years. Now I work in one of the school's research labs, dedicated to storytelling and the critical use of space — subjects that interest me a great deal and that I teach there. I was also editor of the journal *Azi-*

mutts, already thirty-some years old, a journal of design theory and design research.

I have an interest in the practice of design; I don't like to define myself within one very specific field. My work moves within the art world, but also within the world of design, design theory, cultural criticism — a large field that interests me, and of course I have to draw on methodologies from sociology, from anthropology. So there's a kind of *ajiacco*, as Ortiz would say, in terms of the tools I use and the subjects that interest me. That's me, somehow, or that's what I attempt to be.

NGR: *And I think that answers it, because the next question is precisely this: I'm very interested in knowing how it fits – in your own practice, and in the practice of people who think about technology, design, and writing from the Caribbean – how poetry or creative writing fits together with research, teaching, and disobedience. Those seem like disparate concepts, but in your work disobedience really becomes a methodology for teaching, so I'd like to explore the relationship between these three elements throughout your work.*

EO: *Yes – I'll start from what would be the most advanced point. When*

you look at the school's website, what do I do there? I'm interested in putting my role as a researcher within the academic sphere into conflict. I think academia, by being so closed off, tends to become strange, to produce distance, a kind of elitist grouping in relation to others, and I'm interested in doing the opposite — in discussing, in questioning how, from within academia, one can still produce knowledge around disobedience, and that interests me.

So, in relation to the mixing of all these forms of knowledge and practice you were mentioning — writing, documentation, teaching — I thou-

ght of documentation when you said teaching, because teaching and documentation share similar roots. In a way you could say documenting is a kind of teaching; they're not two separate things, the root is connected.

I think of disobedience in relation to what was happening in Cuba when I was producing one of my books. I'd been invited to research three flows of production within the home — food, laundry, communication, and transportation; there were actually four, brought by a French collective doing research in Brazil, Cuba, France, and, I believe, India.

At some point I realized the funding came from a French institution tied to the chemical industry, and that gave me the sense I was working for someone I didn't know, as if I were doing a project for someone who hadn't been disclosed from the start. I felt like I was in the role of an informant — a role that, if you read *Technological Disobedience*, I don't put it that way, but it's the role sociologists probably assign to us, the locals, and to me it's detestable. I rejected it, and I warned them the information I gave them would be tainted, corrupted, twisted by me, because I'm also interested in

fiction, in contamination.

So the term appears as a kind of counter-proposal, in response to what they'd asked of me. In the end they accepted it and published the book, keeping my original text where I talk about this — and of course, that was the first spark for the term. But afterward I found other possibilities, in relation to how we'd been relating to technologies — how technology was a kind of truth, a poetics of devices, people would say. You could find in Cuba a gearbox motor from one machine inserted into a wooden lathe; the level of surprise could be enormous. Leaving a house's court-

yard like that would produce a kind of respect — and respect is the word I've used, because what interests me is deepening the notion of its audience. But there was also a kind of unease: normally we have a certain respect toward industrial products, and the more sophisticated they become at the electronic level, the less capable an individual feels of interacting with what's inside them. In Cuba, the crisis was a kind of liberating condition, in a way — people opened everything up, and it didn't matter whether NASA had made it or the iPhone had made it, if the object could be thought of in

many different ways.

I learned later that “discrete” had a different meaning in mathematics, one actually quite close to what I was proposing, but I was using it in its everyday sense — the discreet thing, something quiet, hidden.

And preparation, resourcefulness — these things go back even to the nineties, when someone got the idea to use a Japanese-made machine for destroying various materials, one that Castro had been given, that ended up in a neighborhood — because of that fantasy he had about biotechnology. When the power went out, the machine would keep

running full of plastic, and workers had to push its piston every day and pull the acrylic out. Someone, seeing that jet of acrylic, got the idea that you could do things with it — I can show you afterward an object, a kind of proto-3D-printed object, but without vectors, like someone drawing in the air, a jet of acrylic falling — a hand-molded 3D shape from chemical components, epoxy in this case.

NGR: *That interests me — I had another question, but I want to go into this book project. According to the research I was doing, the first version of that book,*

published through this French research group, happened in Flash.

EO: Yes, Macromedia Flash.

NGR: *Macromedia Flash – and in a way what you’re presenting now is the capstone, since Flash became completely obsolete. So I’m curious to explore this topic, which is intimately tied to technology: the original, pristine version was created for an environment that became obsolete, and it can still be consulted today by scholars through a technology that is, in a way, old, almost analog. Why did you decide to go first with Flash and then with the book?*

ERNESTO OROZA

What benefits do you see in continuing to publish in digital media that planned obsolescence is going to dismantle? I ask this thinking, for instance, about centers of study in electronic literature, which, by being so specific to the electronic medium, end up setting aside many other approaches where the electronic form is just one stage of presence, and the work afterward becomes many other things. What led you to choose Flash for this first publication, and what led you to decide Flash wasn't going to be enough? At the time Flash was unquestionable — looking back now, it's remarkable that you didn't stick only with it. What led you to make that shift?

EO: Well, *Rikimbili* was published in 2009; it was made in 2004, meaning the editorial process started in 2005. When I left Cuba, the French team took the Flash file with them, along with the archives and texts, to publish the book. I made it in Flash at that time because — people imagine I have enormous photographic archives on many subjects, but I never actually had a camera in Cuba. I relied on friends, on people who helped me. I didn't have a computer either, just a very bad one — a Pentium, I think a 3 or a 4, with a monitor that looked out of focus, a 640×480 designed by *Michele De*

Lucchi, the radical Italian designer from the sixties and seventies. I really didn't have technological means in Cuba. My kids were born in 1992 and 1996, so you can imagine most of what little I had went into keeping life going at home. At some point, around 2003 to 2005, I managed to get access to a computer, and I'm self-taught with computing — I learned it on my own, because at school I only reached the level of Ventura, the early software; I finished design school in 1993 and must have taken that course around 2002, I don't quite remember. So I never had a formal education in

computing beyond what I secured for myself.

With Flash, I'd already made my own website, archived somewhere — there's an archive in Brazil that gathered many of the websites that interested them in the nineties, and mine, one of the first “.net” sites, is stored there; you can sometimes find it online. I made it myself with very basic HTML — I'm no expert, but I like it when I find it again, rough, made with tables and things like that.

What interested me about Flash was its animation capability — this multimedia format, born out of a

technological subsidy, had animation, interaction, hyperlinks, all that interconnectivity built into the program. It let me put in video, put in text, do things the printed, textual universe didn't let me do. At that time I made three multimedia pieces in the same format: one about a shooting range, called *Provisional Enemy*, which later became a very famous video that's circulated the whole world; another, bought by the Montreal Museum of Art, called *Ágen*, a kind of complete poetic piece in which I use the word "revolution," running through the whole permutation from *Ágen* — the

typeface — to its last form, with a soundtrack compressing that transition into the duration of the sound; and the first, *Rikimbili*, the sound version of which circulates only among curators and a handful of art critics. There's another piece, *Legal Comfort*, also made in Macromedia Flash, researching comfort in Cuba and the stigma that supposed revolutionaries attached to comfort — they demanded all sorts of sacrifices from everyone else, while I was living in absolute comfort myself, and no one asked us for austerity, really. I wrote something about this and made that small piece.

So I understand the question — it's something certain people worry about all the time. I have a huge digital archive, but that's not enough for me; I have to print. I have, for example, about seven hundred digital photographs here that I need to print, because I need the ability to have physical material — to view it, to work with it, as a material object — since I know technology moves forward and afterward there are no readers left for the materials you have. I've had those experiences: formats have broken on me technically, I've moved from Mac to Windows, I've lost a lot of digital information

many times in my life, and I have Android devices that never connect anymore; I keep them hoping they might someday be readable again, through some tool or system. That's a question that's on my mind all the time — and also your question about the two formats. I come from the world of graphic design too, so I have an interest in publishing, and in cinema; both formats offered different experiences. Looking back at the *Rikimbili* multimedia from today's design perspective, I'd change many things — there's a kind of naturalistic imitation in how interfaces worked back then, the

button feedback that sinks in and pops back up so you have the sense the click actually happened. I'd do all of that differently today. I'll look for the file at some point and send it to you — if you have a Macromedia player you might be able to check it out.

NGR: *But this project interests me exactly because, according to the research I've done, it's one of the first books and research projects conceived first for the digital environment and then translated into print, and that's an important point in the timeline I want to trace. The other question comes precisely becau-*

se I'm very interested in your relationship with the word, with poetry – I was thinking about one of the first projects that caught my interest when I started exploring your work, the idea behind Signos 36. Because in that project I feel a set of tactics gets consolidated that keeps repeating throughout your work, and that has as a key foundation the work of the poet Feijóo. I'd like to know the process that led you to try to print this issue 36 of the magazine Signos, and how you used to read Feijóo, Ernesto, and how you read him now – how time has changed that reading, or not.

EO: The Feijóo project was in 2018,

I think — now that you put it that way, you might be right. I made a compilation of earlier material — the same year they invited me to do the *SNET* piece, in 2014; the work premiered in 2015, during an event running parallel to the Havana Biennial. Around that same time they invited me to do another project with *Revolico*, one of the Cuban websites, a kind of Cuban classifieds site I've worked with a lot and still work on today. I decided to convince the people who ran *Revolico* — two Cuban programmers hiding from the regime, who'd had a years-long battle with the censors

because people needed *Revolico* — I managed to interview one of them in Miami and negotiate an insert within *Revolico* during the Biennial. I invited Cuban artists, from Miami and from the island, one group to redesign the *Revolico* logo and another to write texts about what *Revolico* means, in the context of Cuba but also on a bigger scale. I see it as a kind of revolution that went to hell, a chaos, a generalized breakdown — but I also like to think of it as a kind of epilogue. The piece is called *Revolico Retombé*, a title that also comes from *Severo Sarduy*, another Cuban poet I'm very interested

in; you can find it online, there are many links to that site.

Preceding that was the Signos project. I made Signos 36 because Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Yanelys were organizing an alternative “00 Biennial” in opposition to the Havana Biennial the regime was blocking and canceling at the time. When Luis Manuel invited me to do the project, the first thing I thought was to find a more tactical solution — a decision so that my own presence in it would be much bigger than what they’d originally invited me for. I’d already done something similar before with

Gean — there was a tabloid, and an exhibition would invite only certain artists, and we'd use the tabloid to bring in ten more, including people who'd contributed but hadn't been included in the original show. That kind of contamination is something that's always interested me, that kind of adventure.

I also discovered that the last issue of the magazine was supposedly published but actually wasn't — Feijóo went into obscurity around then, possibly some kind of senile dementia, though that's never been confirmed. Someone told me he carried the mock-up of that issue in

his bag for a long time, similar to how I later carried mine to make the piece. I decided it was an interesting editorial framework to keep riffing on differently each time — this first *Signos 36* is the one I'm best known for, though I've made four or five more developed versions since. I invited many people who normally wouldn't have been invited, to ask whether they'd support Luis Manuel's project and the 00 Biennial. *Antón* and *Montabas* told me yes, that it was an act of solidarity; many others said yes too, from *José Bedia*, an important Cuban artist living in Miami, one of the more important

ones from the eighties, who agreed through a friend, *Luis Cristiano Vanilla*. A lot of people sent their pieces over, which got compiled and sent to the island — there's a story about *Gean Moreno* getting held at the airport and having a dozen copies confiscated from his bag. What interested me was the possibility, in the book and the editorial approach, of including many voices, putting voices out there, producing conversation. What interests me is dissidence, fragmentation, openness — it didn't need to be a magazine specifically, it could be something looser, more dynamic, more possible

to compile and introduce in parts. As for Feijóo — I've been reading him since childhood; I've had an interest in comic-style literature since I was a kid, in humor, in literature generally. Something biographical I haven't mentioned: I had a very strong recurring nightmare as a child, an abstract image I can't quite describe. I got used to reading comic literature very young — Marcos de Mara, the romance comics that circulated in Cuba, literature that was always controlled in the end, but I read what I wanted and didn't let myself be constrained. There was already a bit of humor

in Feijóo — Juan Piro de Invereta, characters he'd created too. I grew up in Havana but in a rural context; six years of my life I studied at a school where you'd be sent to the countryside to work during the day and go to classes in the afternoon. I feel good in rural spaces, and Feijóo brought that quality to his literature. The notion of the “vegetal poet” is, for me, one of his most resonant, coherent images — the idea of really being immersed in that world, not illustrating the countryside but being the countryside. That was in my own practice too.

I have collections of almost everything by Feijóo, and I understand he still resonates through the many different experiences people had with him — people who adore him, who remember him, who despise him. He also left, of course, plenty written in his own words that today are unthinkable — a very harsh rejection of homosexuals, for instance. He was a man of his period, someone who loved the revolution as a man of the countryside, who had lived the experience of rural life; a figure who could be quite contradictory. But I think he left a legacy not only within

his own practice but within many other people who interest me too, like *Sergio Vitier*, a brilliant Cuban and Caribbean musician, who will always tell you “Feijóo is my father” — even though he’s the son of *Sergio Vitier*, he’ll point to Feijóo as his godfather, in a way. *Orlando Hernández*, an important Cuban critic and artist I respect very much, also has his own relationship with Feijóo’s history. So, for me, he’s a controversial figure — as everyone, I think, ends up being.

And for me, in fact — for those who don’t know Feijóo’s work — despite being a man of his time,

reproducing ideas that today seem opposed to the logic of our time, I feel he was always exploring the connection between visual communication, expressiveness, and a poet connected to popular culture rather than to high culture. That's one of the things that interests me most about him — the idea that you could connect with what he called “unedited nature,” the side of a palm tree, a Romerillo weed. There's a lot in Feijóo's thinking that's inscribed in how I believe things should be done. There wasn't an elitist stance, though there was another issue with opacity, maybe an era of opacity —

Feijóo already spoke of that need not to think of yourself as being on the periphery of cultural production. It's the opposite, really: every space of this kind produces knowledge adapted to a specific place that might not be understood elsewhere. You might get labeled parochial, but he was already having that discussion, which interests me a lot too. Honestly, I've heard all kinds of opinions — I tell people, first, read him, explore before falling into prejudice.

NGR: *I want to keep going along this line, with the SNET experiences. I'd love it if you could give me a timeline of*

when you start exploring this technology, the process for making the piece If a Bird Wakes, and then the collaborations that start happening – simultaneously, with the Mood Foundation here in Miami – and how SNET, in a way, through your work, ends up shaping a whole gamer culture, a whole communicative culture reflected in the work of a younger generation of artists.

EO: My direct link to SNET was around 2003, when it wasn't even called SNET yet, and didn't have the scale it has now. A tech-savvy nephew of mine, already a gamer at the time – thirteen or fourteen years

old — had gotten himself a machine. If I wanted to do anything with a computer, I had to go to his house; he'd been connected since around 2003 to his friends on the network that later became "el vino," which eventually got absorbed into a large chunk of the whole Havana area. He started having these connections, and I'd log into the server at times to understand what was going on — at that point it was only through LAN cables, no phone lines, running a cable from one house to the next; I helped him carry it many times. Initially they'd move the machines from place to place, but that

caused conflicts with the police, since it always looked like theft, so they started laying cables using connections already installed around the city. The first “enemies,” as I always say, were people doing something else entirely — stealing electricity — because there was a kind of negotiation over public space around all these practices. My nephew was also one of the first people working with *el paquete*, the packet service — that first disk that connected directly to the TV.

After I left Cuba in 2007, I went back in 2012 when my father passed away — I got my passport reissued,

which I hadn't wanted to do for many reasons, but my father and sister asked me to. I went back every year after that, to see my sister and continue the research a bit. During that period I started convincing my nephew to let me see other people's setups, to get to know other people — everyone was very scared, because there was an unwritten rule that you couldn't talk with the press or with foreigners about this practice. His friends would tell me, please, you have to erase the username, trying to camouflage themselves, though everyone did it out of fear at first. What I have from that period are

screenshots of the graphics people designed for the forums — not just gamers, but people with football forums, a fake Facebook, imitation forums — and some photos of my nephew's setup, the cables, the machine.

When they invited me for this exhibition, I wanted to open up a mechanism — I was in Miami, not there at the moment, unlike when I made *Signos*, when I went to Cuba myself and carried the magazine to the exhibition. This time I had to negotiate with the SNET points of contact by email, always very cautious, since you never know who's

really working with you, what ties they have to the political police, who were always infiltrating these systems. The “ten commandments” — the restrictions imposed — varied across different nodes; there was no single unified version. We started thinking about how to do it: I told them I wanted to make a kind of exquisite corpse, to produce a collective poem about *SNET*. They agreed, the curator liked the idea, and in 2015 the piece went live, circulating before the Biennial. She suggested we also install it in the gallery — I’d wanted people to have a private space to write in, not a public one,

and in the end that material got included too, becoming part of the final poem. Then in 2017, *Rodolfo* invited me to show the piece with him at the *Mood Foundation*, in the Fanguito area of Miami — there we simply showed a printed, editorial handout that people could take with the full poem, along with a kind of wallpaper made from materials I'd been downloading at the start of the project, researching how people talked about it.

I'm very interested in how others talk about things — how the government now uses the word “rikimbili” in legal documents, a word that was

always in use even though they tried to officially call it a *VAP*, a vehicle assembled from parts and pieces. I've found fifteen different spellings of "rikimbili," almost like an anagram, and the one used everywhere today — the one I've been using myself — has become the settled way to write it.

There's another project too: with *el paquete*, I'd already done something early on. I managed to get *Revolico* scraped and dropped entirely inside *el paquete* — an offline version, circulating freely, and there were texts directly opposed to the regime in there too, by *Anaurema*, by *Luis*

Eligio, the poet who's in Miami; nobody realized that material was hidden inside it. In the case of *el paquete*, I worked with it in an almost automatic way — *Revolico* too, as an important product.

NGR: *A parenthesis — could you quickly describe what el paquete is for listeners who aren't familiar with this topic at all?*

EO: Let's say it's a cultural product that has evolved, and today it's a terabyte drive holding a terabyte of information, curated every week all over Cuba, distributed almost hand

to hand through couriers. Someone arrives in your neighborhood with that matrix, passes it to the first person in a chain of about fifteen people, and each of them passes it to the next — I take the packet, copy onto my computer whatever I want, and when I'm done, I call the next person; they come pick it up, I hand over the payment, at the time about a dollar, and they take it away and do the same. It might have updated soap operas, high-definition movies pirated from US satellite feeds, YouTube videos, manuals, magazines, music, software — a massive compilation of electronic content — and

the last person in the chain calls the courier, who comes, picks up the drive, and doesn't come back for a while.

My thesis started from interviews I conducted; luckily I found a key person in this history. It actually starts with the regime itself, not as it's known today — the pirated download practice begins once the regime's intelligence services install an enormous parabolic antenna in Cuba, around 1989. This was an antenna bought in Ocala, sent to Mexico, and from there brought into Havana and installed in Miramar, meant to download movies for

generals, colonels, official drivers — three movies a week on VHS tapes, as a kind of entertainment for them. The drivers started to drain the service, and it began leaking into popular culture. *Francisco Masó*, a Cuban artist also in Miami, was one of the first people who worked on this material — I met him later in Miami; he'd also worked on 3D video parlors. But really the people who worked most on *el paquete* were musicians, who understood better than anyone that this circuit could be a vehicle for popularity, for distributing music given to them by the record labels — release it and

it circulates faster than waiting for radio and TV. SNET and *el paquete* often overlapped — you could access *el paquete*'s content within SNET's own servers, and at some point the two systems merged, with information transferring both ways.

NGR: *And I want to keep going with this, because throughout this process you start developing, based on these participatory observations, two concepts that are key to understanding your work: “technological audience” on one hand, and “architecture and objects of necessity” on the other. I’m curious to understand — when you moved from Havana*

to Miami, what clashes, differences, contrasts did you find working with these concepts in two different contexts?

EO: Yes, interesting — “object of necessity” is the first of the two concepts, one of the oldest, from the nineties; “architecture of necessity” comes around 1997. First there was the “declaration of necessity” — recognizing that an object was capable of expressing the relationship between the individual and the resources they had, whether technological or intellectual, and what they needed at that moment. Then, “technological disobedience”

comes around 2004–2005, when the whole Macromedia Flash project was happening, and I revisited the research on objects because I was already working on “architecture of necessity” at that point. This has happened to me many times — I step away from a research topic to take a breather, and then someone pulls me back into it.

When I arrived in Miami, I brought my own tools with me — and that’s actually a question a Miami collector asked me early on, at an exhibition I did in 2008: “But you used to work on Cuba — what are you going to do here, kid?” That’s typical of

the moment when you're seen as working on a specific context, but I've actually worked a lot on Miami; I'm very interested in how context shapes objects, the impact context has on everyday cultural objects. What I'd developed as tools, I didn't feel I'd lost — I brought them with me, along with an elaborated research question and a kind of methodology, and then you have to adapt, to respond to where you are, until you start to understand the context you're living in.

In Miami I started working very quickly, in 2008, with *Gean Moreno*, an artist, curator, and writer of Co-

lombian descent born in New York. We wrote a book together and a lot of texts — generic objects, for instance, published in *e-flux journal*.

NGR: Yes, actually, when I started looking, something that struck me is that you can find a lot of this online, but the library here in Miami, or at the University of Miami, doesn't have much of it — which really strikes me, that they haven't moved to acquire this into their collections, especially since there's printed material that's basically one-of-a-kind. I'm thinking, for instance, of the publication I was trying to get, *Learning from Little Haiti* — I haven't been able

to get that publicly, haven't been able to consult it. That's an important parenthesis, and maybe it'll be useful for someone out there listening to the podcast.

EO: Good, yes — I know that all these texts we wrote in the United States around *e-flux* were later compiled in a publication called *Maison Mare*. There's a text published in *e-flux journal*, then *Learning from Little Haiti*, another called *The City to Come*, also published, which later turned into physical pieces through the *e-flux* people too. Several of these texts got inserted into a publication, translated into French

as well — but what I understood at the time was that there were two different material contexts, though there were individuals living with certain levels of restriction in both. For example, there's a text about the use of buckets and milk crates in the United States, in Miami's neighborhoods especially, but you can find them across the country — *Gean* and I made a kind of large sculptural object in space around this, one of the Miami pieces.

Normally when a designer or architect uses a mass-produced industrial object like a bucket, the approach is almost mimetic — turn it upside

down, it looks like a lampshade. A person living in conditions of urgency sees the bucket as a field of possibilities instead — every element inside it, the structure, the material, is a space full of possibilities. That's a lesson I brought with me from what I'd learned about how Cubans confronted the crisis in the nineties: the idea that an object is no longer a closed image but a field of possibilities. There's a lot of that knowledge that enters the discussion in Miami's different context. In Cuba, products exchanged through the Soviet Union meant everyone had the same object, so once someone lear-

ned how to use it, everyone learned with it — a kind of shared learning. Something similar happens with standardized, generic objects in the United States, if people approach them the same way.

But at the electronic level, at the computing level, I didn't have that same continuity, because I'd had these questions about "el vino" back in 2003–2004, then left in 2007, and reconnected with the phenomenon from the United States in 2014 to make this piece — but by then I already had a computer, I had everything. I actually lived that transition in reverse: not having a

computer, then having one, once I moved to the United States. I'd adapted somewhat in Cuba in the later years, but in 2003–2004 I had no other way to make things happen.

I also wrote recently, for a German magazine, a text developing the idea of “the efficiency” — what Cubans in Miami call the *efficiency*, the practice of building a small unit in the backyard for extra income, to send money to Cuba. I invented a concept for this, “pantographic architecture.” The pantograph is an object used in graphic design in the eighties to enlarge figures — two

arms with a set of linkages, so when you draw an A here, it comes out bigger over there; an object that existed before the computer, before Xerox, that let you enlarge an image. I use it as an image for a pantographic relationship between Miami and Havana — a small improvement here, a window that becomes a garden, lets you raise the rent, and you send money to Havana so a relative can build a balcony; my own family built a balcony in Havana that way. It's a pantographic relationship between the money I made in Miami and the transformations of the city in Havana.

NGR: *I'd love to have that text – I'll message you in a bit to remind you to send it. The next question is related to Kamau Brathwaite: what relationship do you see, from a Caribbean point of view, between poetry and disobedience, and what role does technology play, thinking of cases like Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, and Joseph Meri, who all approach disobedient technology using poetry as a tool?*

EO: I know Joseph too, and I know Brathwaite through his writing – I've had the privilege of knowing him personally, and I know his work – but in Kamau's case it's throu-

gh what I read, through history, through biography. And you tie it to disobedience, but I also tie it to the notion of necessity that interests me. I'm interested, for instance, in the case of *Lezama Lima*, who had this notion of poetics — not just poetry, but poetics as a system organizing historical elements, words, concepts, knowledge. Lezama spoke of “imaginary eras,” a concept that produces a poetic relationship with a group of events and forms of knowledge, aligning them in a way that represents a poetics — aligned with his own knowledge, his cultural production, his thinking.

In the same way, *Benítez Rojo* speaks of “the repeating island,” and of “the peoples of the sea” — a structure that organizes knowledge in other parts of the world, in this case the ocean, the relationship with the ocean, in a way that would displace the whole idea of Global South and Global North, which for him becomes secondary. What Benítez proposes has a force that comes more from relationships with the environment, with nature, with things — and that kind of knowledge interests me. When you get to the core of his thinking — when he talks about the foam breaking on

the shore, and that becomes pixels for him, something else — that fragmentation of water, the rupture of the Caribbean island, of its shore, of its origin, forces him to confront everything he learned in the Eurocentric education he'd had, all the European-rooted poetry he loved. There's an exercise of understanding a specific reality in the case of the Caribbean — not just the islands, but he also tries to integrate the continental territories. In the end he's the one who proposes the thesis people are now trying to dismantle, the idea of "submarine unity," which he kept emphasizing

— I’m actually rereading him right now to study that idea. A small parenthesis on Kamau, giving him his due credit: he was always trying to integrate that space, mentioning *Miguel Ángel Asturias*, Cuban writers, even Brazilian writers — he always had this idea that the region needed to be understood not as an area outside the West, but as a laboratory for reinventing the center. That’s one of the things that interests me most, and it’s what gives him that unity, the submarine unity — I think he talks about “submarine history” in *What Is History*, this notion that there’s a history that hasn’t been

written yet, because everything supposedly happens in England, when everything that's out there is, of course, underneath.

I've been thinking about that too, using geology studies mostly in Venezuela — there's a lot of work on geosensitivity, on how a sensitivity forms from the earth's formation itself. There was a professor, I don't know if he's passed, who proved that kind of unity in the Caribbean by showing that the diamonds of Sierra Leone and of Venezuela shared the same geological formation period. From that I'm trying to build the idea that submarine unity

is also mineral, because it connects everyone underneath extractivism — the minerals in the soil connect what people call the Global South, because those minerals settled and formed during the same stage of the Earth's formation, at the same time, then separated, and in a way that minerality remains present in the logic. That's a logic close to the imaginary eras, and to Lezama too — he has that kind of structure. And you mentioned the technological dimension of it, in relation to poetry — of course there's *Glissant*, and I have *Homer* here, from *Walcott* — right here. There are beautiful

images about rhythm, about time — images from *Walcott* about Homer, about an iguana opening its eyelid and closing it. It's indescribable, the way he wrote it, a perfect image: when the iguana's eye opens again, there are already men measuring the trees — the moment just before the colonizer arrives.

In Lezama's case, there's something that interests me a lot, connected to this notion of disobedience: he always talked about "radiant poetry," among many other terms — terms that are seen negatively in some way, because for Cubans you wouldn't expect a defense like

that to come out of poverty. But he wasn't talking about that; Lezama was talking about Africans and Europeans arriving in the Americas without words to name that other world, calling it "the land of catachresis." Catachresis is a rhetorical device, a kind of metaphor born out of necessity — like saying "the leg of the table," "the mouth of the bottle." He said we found lands at zero, where everything had to be named again, and many of the most-used words were catachreses; some words the natives already had were simply absorbed into the language, others had to be reinvented. That image

of America as a land of catachresis interests me too, because it's a land of reinvention, of possibility — everything has to be made anew, everything can be experimented with, everything is open. Lezama compares it, saying the American landscape is open and the European landscape is closed — the American landscape, from the metaphor's point of view, has all the possibilities, while the European landscape is already set, already trapped within its own discourse, its own language. So, that's how I see it. Kamau is a later reading for me — before that it was more Lezama I was reading.

And my reading of Kamau in English isn't the same now as it was fifteen years ago, since I wasn't educated in English — I learned to speak it in the United States, so the reading changes too. At a formative level, in terms of ideas, my own affinity is more with Lezama, with *Severo Sarduy* and the baroque; I'm very interested in the new baroque. With *Glissant* too, of course, very much so, since he's been widely translated — I'd go to Kamau in English, I'm not sure he's been translated into Spanish. I don't think anyone has dared take on that later work related to the "Sy-

corax" video style, when he starts developing a theory of non-linear literature that breaks with the whole idea of linearity, of print. If you look closely at his books, he starts with *DreamStories* — not quite Sycorax yet — but later, in *Barabajan Poems* and other books, he doesn't even mention Sycorax by name anymore, he talks about the "Sycorax format," basically a homemade production system: he had his Mac, and he'd say, well, this thing I see here on the screen — I hit this button and it prints the page, and I can make my own books, I don't need anyone else anymore. He started with that idea

of the mother of Caliban, which is, well, incredible.

NGR: *I think, to wrap up, I'd love it if you could give us a kind of canon, or an essential bibliography – well, “canon” is a heavy word – an essential bibliography for artists interested in working with poetry, research, and technology from a disobedient angle.*

EO: I think I've already said what I consider essential, but without a doubt – I can speak more about the poetry of Cuba, about Lezama's case, and I think it's essential: Lezama's literature, Severo Sarduy too, Vir-

gilio too seems important to me, in terms of everything that is insularity, the relationship with the island — I see Lezama more in this dimension of what's called poetics. I'm interested in poetics, in the necessity today, and I try to find, not a parallel with Lezama's imaginary era, since it has no real connection, but conceptually I'm interested in that proposal, the notion of an imaginary era.

Of course, *Glissant* I think is essential — his book on the Antilles, *Caribbean Discourse*, seems fundamental to me. But I don't have a fixed list — if you ask me what I'm reading right now, I'm reading *Imágenes que resis-*

ten by *Andrea Soto Calderón*. There's a lot of literature that's important to keep reading.

It's of course not exactly Caribbean, but for example, I have a publication here — let me pull up a photo and find it for you — that we made in relation to the lab where we're working at the school. It's a small book designed by *Filipina*, a designer we work with there, simply a small atlas of bibliographic references that I use too, that the colleagues who work with me use — of course, by *Escobar*, from the design perspective, mainly about what he's done on design.

But mainly, since you're asking me now for a recommendation, I think I can give a few more names — Kamau, of course, as well. All of these figures are toolboxes for me, in a practical sense: they don't just craft a beautiful sentence, they produce a kind of formulation for something else, a capacity to spark, to transform the reader. It's not that they hand you an idea — they produce a way of understanding, a tool to visualize the context of your own life, your relationships, things. That's what happens to me with *Glissant*, with *Feijóo* too, in different ways, and with *Sarduy* — he

produces such tools, very strange things, very strange images, full of potential for thinking. *Benítez Rojo's* book, *The Repeating Island*, I think is a fundamental book — I don't know how criticism in the United States has received it, but it seems fundamental to me. I also keep reading *María Fernando Ortiz*.. That's what interests me: tools, methodologies, this literature as something you can operate on to do something more. There's a delight when you read Kamau, you sink into the sea with him, but he also gives you things to build with — that's what I like about that kind of literature. So I'll repeat

it: *Glissant*, *Lezama* — those would be
the two pillars.

