The Exploration of a Nonbinary Gender Identity in the Visual Work of Claude Cahun

Miranda DeBrine
University of Central Florida

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THE EXPLORATION OF A NONBINARY GENDER IDENTITY IN
THE VISUAL WORKS OF CLAUDE CAHUN

by

MIRANDA G. DeBRINE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Art History
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Thesis Chair: Ilenia Colon Mendoza, Ph.D.
Abstract

The intent of this thesis is to explore the concept of a nonbinary gender identity in the self-portraits of Surrealist artist Claude Cahun. These self-portraits, along with their personal writings, support the conclusion that Cahun was (or could be considered in contemporary language) a transgender, nonbinary and/or gender fluid individual who expressed that through their work. This thesis will investigate and analyze the photographic work of Claude Cahun as their own personal exploration of their sexuality and gender identity using both the context of their writings and those of other contemporaries within a framework of early 20th century culture to better understand their content.
Dedication

This research is dedicated to all people who fully embrace and celebrate who they are despite the world around them, and all people who never got the chance.
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank with all my heart Dr. Ilenia Colon Mendoza for her amazing and unending guidance and support through not only this project but my time at UCF.

I also would like to thank my parents for giving me this opportunity in the first place; I love you both so much and hope to make you proud.

And finally, a thank you to Mr. Bill Renninger, my AP Art History teacher in high school, who started it all.
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Introduction

Claude Cahun, born Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob, was an author, playwright, surrealist photographer and anti-fascist activist who spent most of their lives in France and the Isle of Jersey from their birth in 1894 to their early death in 1954. Throughout their career they went by various aliases and pennames, settling on Claude Cahun in 1917, a gender-ambiguous name in French. While they considered themselves a writer before a photographer it is their photography that they are probably best known for today, becoming popular for their “modern” content that explores gender identity and its presentation.

These self-portraits, along with their personal writings, support the conclusion that Cahun was (or could be considered, as they did not have the language of gender and sexuality in their lifetime) a transgender, nonbinary individual, possibly gender fluid. For this reason, throughout this research I will be using the singular they/them pronouns in reference to Cahun as well as their partner Marcel Moore. This thesis will investigate and analyze the photographic work of Claude Cahun as their own personal exploration of their sexuality and gender identity. I will use both the context of their writings, and those of other contemporaries within a framework of early 20th century culture to better understand their content.
Chapter One: Biography

Familial Ties

On the 25th of October 1894 Lucy Rene Mathilde Schwob, known in history as Claude Cahun, was born into an intellectual upper-class family in Nantes, the capital of the Loire region of western France. Along with an older brother, Georges (b. 1888), Cahun was given a privileged upbringing. They had access to all the amenities available to those of that economic background and the family was also deeply involved in the literary world of France at the time.¹

The family patriarch, Maurice Schwob, was the publisher of a major Republican newspaper based out of their hometown of Nantes entitled Le Phare de la Loire (The Lighthouse of the Loire) as well as several other journals and publications that reported on both literary and popular subjects.² In addition to this was Cahun’s uncle Marcel Schwob, a well-known and well-accomplished symbolist poet of the time, whose literary works would later have great influence over Cahun’s writing. He was notably a good friend of gay English writer Oscar Wilde, another influence and inspiration in Cahun’s work.³

On the opposite end of the family was Cahun’s mother, Mary-Antoinette Courbebaisse. The relationship between Cahun and their mother was rocky to say the least. According to records, Mary-Antoinette (sometimes referred to as simply ‘Toinette’ by Cahun) suffered from a severe personality disorder that lead to her being put in and out of various mental institutions

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² Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 14
throughout Cahun’s childhood, eventually being permanently institutionalized and later dying in the asylum sometime in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{4} According to Cahun’s own writing:

“Maman named me ‘my little pig’! [mon petit crochon [sic] She pushed back the end of my nose. It saddened her…that I did not have a Greek nose. My ears, which slightly stuck out, made her sad. Just like the nose: ‘it is small; it would be completely pretty if…Your ears would be perfect, my little pig, if you are willing…’ I let her do it. She made me wear a bonnet.”\textsuperscript{5}

Toinette came from a Catholic family known for their anti-Semitism, which was increasingly on the rise, so her reasoning in marrying in to a Jewish family is still unclear in my research. When Cahun writes that she was “saddened…that I did not have a Greek nose” they reference the anti-Semitic sentiments harbored by French culture in the 1890s where the “Greek profile” became a symbol of the ‘true’ Frenchness, based on the idea that the ‘true French’ were able to trace their lineage back to the Grecian empire.\textsuperscript{6} The constant ridicule centered around their physical looks is most likely what lead to Cahun’s eating disorders and body dysphoria later in life.\textsuperscript{7}

**Study in England**

Cahun’s study in England was precipitated by events involving their father. In 1894 French army artillery captain and former classmate of Cahun’s father, Maurice Schwob Alfred Dreyfus, was accused and found guilty of committing treason against his country by acting as a spy for the side of the Germans. This was all based on found documents that were later

\textsuperscript{4} Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 18
\textsuperscript{7} Mary Ann Caws, *Glorious Eccentrics: Modernist Women Painting and Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 128.
discovered to be forgeries. He was convicted and sentenced to life at the French penal colony known as Devil’s Island. Two years later in 1898, new evidence emerged to another French military officer, Major Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, as the true traitor. It wasn’t until 1906 when Dreyfus was fully cleared of all charges by the court, pardoned by the President of the French Republic and reinstated in the army. Though declared innocent of all charges the trial, this review brought the affair back into the public eye, and with it, a new resurgence of anti-Semitism in France.

The Dreyfus Affair was a common subject of Marcel Schwob in his column written for Le Phare de la Loire, sympathetic towards Dreyfus and his innocence. The pardoning of Dreyfus in 1906 brought attention back to the Affair and in turn back to the support given to Dreyfus by the Schwob family, most notably from Marcel and Maurice in the Le Phare de la Loire. About the Anti-Dreyfus movement, French historian and sociologist Pierre Birnbaum states:

“…the members of the league [Ligue Antisemite] launched a ‘relentless campaign against the influences of the Jewish colony, so powerful in Nantes.’ And benefited from the considerable support of several newspapers, which published vengeful press releases. They were only combated explicitly only by Le Phare de la Loire, whose editor, Maurice Schwob, became the target of the local anti-Semitic movement.”

Due to the increased negative attention towards the Schwob family, Cahun had begun to be targeted themselves by their fellow classmates in school in Nantes. In an “autobiographical” letter to a friend, Cahun wrote “One day, tied up with skipping ropes to a tree in the playground, I was pelted with gravel.” According to a passage from one of Cahun’s other writings they

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8 Marcus Williamson, Claude Cahun at School in England (United States: Marcus Williamson, 2011), 3
9 Williamson, 3
mention a quote from their father, who apologizes for bringing them in to such a horrid world.\footnote{“[My father] could offer me nothing more…than this: ‘I am very sorry for having brought you into this world.’.…with real tears in his eyes (that was the worst!)” Shaw, 16 Claude Cahun, ‘Lettre a Paul Levy’, in Ecrîts, ed. Francois Leperlier (Paris: Place 2002), 717.} After these incidents Maurice Schwob sent Cahun away to the boarding school Parsons Mead in England, until the lash back from the Dreyfus Affair dissipated. The Parsons Mead School was chosen by Maurice because of the family’s connections in England thanks to his brother Marcel, a reported anglophile who lived in England for a time with author Charles Whibley, who most likely recommended the school to the Schwobs.\footnote{Marcus Williamson, \textit{Claude Cahun at School in England} (United States: Marcus Williamson, 2011), 6} 

Parsons Mead was advertised as a “high-class Boarding and Day School for the Daughters of Gentlemen” with the goal of yielding “Simple-hearted girls who will develop into noble women, honourable and true.”\footnote{Williamson, \textit{Claude Cahun at School in England} (United States: Marcus Williamson, 2011), 11} Parsons also held the art of writing extremely high, as evident from the motto “\textit{Nulla dies sines linea}”, Latin for “Not a day without a line” which, in this context, most certainly refers to the written word. This focus on literary writing was also most likely one of the factors that lead Maurice to send his child there.\footnote{Williamson, \textit{Claude Cahun at School in England} (United States: Marcus Williamson, 2011), 15}

Cahun was, even before Parsons, an avid writer and reader.\footnote{Williamson, \textit{Claude Cahun at School in England} (United States: Marcus Williamson, 2011), 15} Their quick comprehension and fluency in the English language even won Cahun a prize for literature in their year at the boarding school.\footnote{Williamson, \textit{Claude Cahun at School in England} (United States: Marcus Williamson, 2011), 11, see footnote 29} Their writing could also be found in the school’s publication Parsons Mead Magazine, a periodical created by and for the students at the school which included text, artwork, photos, and postcards as well as news from the head teacher along with schedules for different

\footnote{Marcus Williamson, \textit{Cahun at School in England} (United States: Marcus Williamson, 2011), 15}
school activities. Cahun wrote three articles for this magazine as Lucy Schwob: *La Foret du Gavre (The Forest of Gavre), Dinner First, and Histoire d’une viellie barque racontee par elle-meme (History of an Old Boat as told by Itself).*\(^{18}\)

All of this is notable in the life of Claude Cahun because of the lasting effects that the year at Parsons Mead that can be found throughout their later work, along with providing us with examples of their earliest known writings. Leperlier concludes that this year abroad was “…beneficial in every respect-her studies were excellent and her health and self-confidence were renewed.”\(^{19}\)

**Marcel Moore**

Suzanne Alberte Malherbe was born in Nantes, France on July 19th 1892. They were an illustrator, designer, photographer, and activist who would come to be remembered under the name Marcel Moore. Their family, the Malherbe’s were another high-class and well-known family in Nantes and both their family and the Schwob family knew one another and were good friends, sometimes vacationing together.

For the purposes of this paper I will be using singular they/them pronouns in reference to Moore as well as Cahun. While there is not much about their own gender identity, there is the very good chance that they too shared many feelings and ideas towards gender and gender identity as Cahun.

\(^{18}\) Williamson, 9  
Around 1909 Moore met Cahun for what they both considered the “first time” even though the two had played together as young children. It was what Cahun would later describe as a “lightning strike”.20 The two became close almost instantly and their relationship quickly evolved from friends to romantic partners. It was around 1910 when Cahun’s father began to show distaste in their relationship with Moore as well as their desire to be a writer, leaving them to pursue their passion in secret; “I became a hypocrite and a trickster. I worked at night in hiding, in a locked room in which I blocked out the light by various means. Above all, I read.”21

Over time this evolved into a crippling depression for Cahun, their health began to fail, stopped eating, and was, by all accounts, on the brink of suicide. Cahun’s father went to Moore’s father, a doctor, for medical advice. Malherbe advised Schwob to “entrust” Cahun to Moore, and Cahun’s father no longer tried to prevent their relationship. To quote Shaw; “Moore’s love saved Cahun’s life.”22

Maurice Schwob also accepted their desire to write and provided Cahun with a job writing for Le Phare de la Loire, additionally letting Moore submit their own illustrations and drawings, leading to some of their first collaborations.23

From 1909 to 1917 Cahun and Moore were forced to keep their growing relationship quiet and discreet. But, in a stunning coincidence, following the 1915 death of Moore’s father and the divorce of Cahun’s parents, Moore’s mother and Cahun’s father married in 1917.24

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20 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 22
21 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 22
22 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 23
23 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 23
24 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 23
couple moved into their own apartment together on the Avenue de Commerce in Nantes, living under the guise as sisters and therefore much more able to express affection towards each other in public as “sisters”.  

During this period of about a year Cahun was able to recover enough from their rough period and temporarily leave Moore for Paris to earn their degree while Moore stayed in Nantes for their education. By 1920 the couple had reunited to begin their truly independent life as a couple in Paris.

The Pseudonyms of Claude Cahun

Between their early life and their move to Paris with Moore, Cahun went through a variety of different pseudonyms and pennames in their literary work before their eventual settling for Claude Cahun, something that they saw not only as a pseudonym but their “true name” as well.

Early examples of their pennames include Lucie or Lucette Schwob, a derivative of their birth name Lucy as, according to Cahun, “the ‘y’ of the first name chosen by my mother was unacceptable”. They also began their move towards the androgynous by going by their middle name, Renee, a unisex name in France. They would later drop the second ‘e’ in honor of the literature of Rene Chateaubriand, founder of French romanticism as well as in honor of their uncle Rene Cahun, who died in the trenches in World War 1. To quote Cahun: “I signed my

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25 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 24  
26 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 25  
27 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 30  
28 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 29  
29
“French essays” with my second name: “Renee”…because of my penchant (still groundless) for the androgynous.” They also wrote at least 40 columns on popular topics and fashion for Le Phare de la Loire under the simple penname ‘M’. 

Beginning with their more “important” works and publications, Cahun began to be more mindful of the meanings behind the names they used. The first of these would be Claude Courlis, which they used for their first major solo publication Views and Visions in 1914, Courlis being a reference to the courlis or curlew, a bird known for its long and hooked beak, a reference to their strong “Jewish looking” nose inherited from their father. Cahun also wrote several essays under the name Daniel Douglas for a Nantes literary journal between 1918 and 1919. The name Douglas is a reference to Lord Alfred Douglas, poet and lover to Oscar Wilde; a framed portrait of the two men can even be seen hanging on the wall of Cahun and Moore’s Paris apartment in the background of a photograph taken there.

By the time the young couple had settled in Paris in the 1920s, the two had settled on the names that they would continue to be known as through history: Marcel Moore and Claude Cahun. While there is nothing specifically explaining Moore’s meaning in their chosen name, Cahun explained it in depth:

“My admiration for my grandmother Mathilde (Cahun), combined with the sentiments I felt ten or twelve years later for the son of the widow of Leon Cahun, created the idea for Claude Cahun—which represented (represents to my eyes) my true name rather than a pseudonym.”

30 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 29
31 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 29
32 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 29
33 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 30
34 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 26
35 Cahun, ‘Lettre a Gaston Ferdiere’, p. 689
Surrealists in Paris

Claude Cahun lived in Paris with their partner Moore in the 1920s. By the time the couple had made their home in the art and culture hub of Paris, the name Lucy Schwob was left behind completely for the penname of Claude Cahun, a name chosen for its gender ambiguity and androgyny as well as for its connection to Leon Cahun, their great uncle.³⁶

When in Paris the two became quickly involved in the local artistic as well as political circles, of which there was a great overlap of the two, given that the Surrealist circle that they participated in were becoming increasingly anti-fascist as well. While politics was not new to Cahun thanks to their exposure to their father’s paper in Nantes, which was highly involved in political events in the news, Cahun began to get much more involved in the political world in the 1930s.

1932 was the year that Cahun finally met André Bretón, the founder of the surrealist movement, in person, despite Cahun’s friendly relations with individuals who had been excluded from the Surrealist circle by Bretón as well as Bretón’s outspoken homophobia.³⁷ Both Cahun and Moore became even more closely entwined with the Surrealists after this meeting, frequently showing up as a couple to the café that the Surrealist had made their meeting space, Cahun dressed in eccentric fabrics and colors with intense makeup and a shaved head, sometimes even dying her scalp various vivid colors. Leperlier writes that this caused some of the other

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³⁶ Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 222.  
³⁷ Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 132-133.
Surrealists in the café to fear for Cahun’s mental state.\textsuperscript{38} To simply put it, Cahun was too surreal for the Surrealists.

But despite this conflict, which seemed to leave Cahun unbothered, both Cahun and Moore remained active members of both the Surrealist and political circles that they had become a part of, Cahun being never uninvolved in politics. While in Paris, Cahun was a member of the \textit{Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Revolutionnaires} (\textit{Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists}), as well as being one of the signers of the surrealist declarations in 1933 and working with the group of the \textit{Contr’attaque Manifesto} (\textit{Counterattack Manifesto}) from 1933 to 1935.\textsuperscript{39}

Their work with influences from the Surrealists is evident in nearly everything they did, moving forward from and even before their involvement with the Surrealists in Paris. Their sculptural work exhibited displays a true understanding of the fundamentals of the iconography of Surrealism as well as a unique and personal spin on these icons and their meanings.

\textbf{The Isle of Jersey and the German Occupation}

In the March of 1937 Cahun and Moore fled Paris to the Isle of Jersey amid the reemergence of anti-Semitism in France from increasing international political tensions. Cahun feared for their safety as well as Moore’s based off their experiences in school during the Dreyfus Affair. Moore was not Jewish, but Cahun feared that their relationship with them could bring them harm.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} Shaw, \textit{Exist Otherwise}, 135.
\textsuperscript{39} Mary Ann Caws, \textit{Glorious Eccentrics: Modernist Women Painting and Writing} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 137.
\textsuperscript{40} Shaw, \textit{Exist Otherwise},197-206.
In Jersey they presented themselves as sisters rather than lovers and once more took on their birth names of Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe for their own safety. Upon arrival they stayed in the same hotel where their families had stayed for holidays since 1916 until they, along with their beloved cat named Kid, purchased and moved in to a farmhouse overlooking St. Brelade’s Bay. This new home would come to be called La Rocquaise. The couple would become known to the locals as “eccentric foreigners”, called “The Sisters” by the locals who knew them, who kept to themselves, becoming known on the island for walking their cat on a leash and sunbathing in their garden.41

The three years before the German occupation of the island were described by Cahun as “the illusion of holiday without end…”.42 During this time the couple was also visited by friends many from Paris, including Jacuelle Lambe who stayed with them for about a month in the late spring of 1939 with her daughter Aube after Lambe’s breakup with André Bretón.43

Sadly, this idyllic lifestyle would come to an end in 1940 upon the arrival of German forces to Jersey.44 Years later Cahun described the feelings of conflict felt in the background of their everyday life: “I think that from 1937 to 1940 I sensed the coming of war (without wanting to believe it).”45 By the summer of 1940 the impending invasion of the Channel Islands was evident, leading the British government to evacuate as many civilians as they could to England. Both Cahun and Moore chose to stay, however; Moore explaining that, while England would

41 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 206
42 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 203
43 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 204
44 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 206-210.
45 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, 206
have been much safer, on the Isle of Jersey the opportunity for resistance against Nazi forces was much greater.\textsuperscript{46}

Cahun and Moore defied Nazi orders from the very beginning, Moore never revealing that she was fluent in German and Cahun never registering themselves as Jewish. When German forces outlawed radios in 1942, the couple willingly gave their up only to buy another in secret to keep track of news from the Allies.

The first real act of resistance from Cahun and Moore came in the form of discarded cigarette packets with the phrase “without end” written on them in pencil, pen and crayon in various handwriting styles as well as written on “any smooth surface they could find.” They were able to walk without suspicion thanks to how well they were able to blend in with the other unassuming inhabitants of the island. Leperlier calls the couple’s resistance tactics “a psychological action of counter-propaganda, at once secret and demystifying, that they hoped would operate by spreading through the ranks of the invader.”\textsuperscript{47} Their plans evolved from the cigarette packets into ones far more elaborate, such as distributing their own newsletters in German based on news gathered from the English papers, which the German papers were weeks behind, therefore “predicting” future events for the German soldiers, as well as some Czech and Russian prisoners of war brought by the Germans as slave labor. These papers were all signed “\textit{Der Soldat ohne Namen},” or The Soldier with no Name”.

\textsuperscript{46} Shaw, \textit{Exist Otherwise}, 210.
Cahun was horrified at how many of the occupants of Jersey seemed to be working along with and following the Nazi’s orders. When a decree was ordered in the spring of 1944 to deport a majority of the island’s inhabitants to Germany, Moore was exempt, most likely due to her age, but Cahun was summoned to the Kommandantur (German headquarters). Cahun arrived to the summons accompanied by their housekeeper Edna and a local doctor who owed them a favor, making a dramatic entrance while holding Cahun up on either side to give the impression that they were incredibly weak and sick. This was successful, and Cahun was not deported.\textsuperscript{48}

However, by the summer of the same year the couple’s anti-German protests caught up with them. The Gestapo was in disbelief when they discovered that the ones responsible for the four-year anti-German campaign had been the pair of old “eccentric sisters” from France. As Leperlier notes in his biography: “We may be surprised that the arrest came so late given their four years of daily agitation…But who would have believed that two old, reserved and respected women would have undertaken this dangerous game and pursued this activity that appeared to occur on such an organized level?”\textsuperscript{49}

While in transport to the prison, Moore and Cahun managed to both swallow what they thought to be a fatal dose of barbiturates in what was a pre-planned suicide pact to be put into effect should they ever be put under arrest. The dose was to low and once discovered unconscious in their cells were transported to a hospital, and then back to the prison when it was obvious the couple would survive the attempt.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} Shaw, \textit{Exist Otherwise}, 223.
\textsuperscript{49} Shaw, \textit{Exist Otherwise}, 226.
\textsuperscript{50} Shaw, \textit{Exist Otherwise}, 226
Cahun and Moore were separated as soon as they arrived at the prison, the two not knowing what had happened to the other. In an almost Shakespearian happening, Moore awoke from their hospital stay believing Cahun to have died and once more attempted to take her own life. After hearing of this, Cahun assumed Moore dead. It wasn’t until Cahun learned that Moore was alive that they seemingly regained the will to live in their less than ideal conditions.\(^{51}\)

Upon their liberation from Jersey and their release from prison, Cahun and Moore were unable to immediately return home due to the farmhouse being stripped bare by German forces. However once they did return, the farmhouse had a different name. No longer \textit{La Rocquaise}, it was now called by the couple \textit{The Farm Without A Name}, therefore carrying on the life of Cahun’s alter ego the \textit{Soldier Without A Name}, used earlier in their resistance activities during the occupation.

While the \textit{Farm Without A Name} was slowly rebuilt, Cahun expressed desire to return once more to Paris, having grown tired of the island with the ever-increasing number of tourists it attracted in the summer months. And, even while still able to visit Paris on occasion during this time, Cahun’s health, along with refusing to leave behind their beloved cats, made it impossible for a full move back to France.\(^{52}\)

Cahun’s health continued in decline and they were hospitalized in St. Helier in Jersey in the fall of 1954 and remained there until their death on the 8\textsuperscript{th} of December. They were buried in the cemetery that neighbored their home, able to be seen in the background of many of their

\(^{51}\) Shaw, \textit{Exist Otherwise}, 226.
\(^{52}\) Caws,140.
photographs taken during this time period. Moore chose the location as well as the inscription for the headstone: two stars of David and the text:

Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob
Nantes 25 October 1894
Jersey 8 December 1954
‘And I saw a new heaven and a new earth’

Moore sold their home and moved onto a new property in a neighboring area where they lived until 1972 until their own declining health and severe chronic pain lead them to take their own life via a lethal dose of barbiturates, much like how she and Cahun decided to attempt to end their lives together while imprisoned.  

Chapter Two: Cultural and Historical Context

By far the most challenging aspect of researching Cahun is drawing their connections from one person, place, activity or movement, to another. One can see the destination, just not the path to take or the vehicle to get you there. This is simply because, while plentiful even while technically in ruin, their work was personal, and in all likelihood never intended to be exhibited to the public in a gallery or show.

The historical and cultural influences that surrounded Cahun throughout their lifetime were vast and varied. In both their written and visual works references can be found ranging
from ancient Greek culture and various religions to the works of homosexual writers and modern sexual philosophies. In this chapter, I will be analyzing what I believe to be the most important historical and cultural influences on their work including the then modern sexology studies, surrealist thought, and the Freudian influence that can be found in both their work as well as influences taken from their family members that were touched upon in Chapter 1.

Claude Cahun lived through what can easily be described as one of the most turbulent periods in human history, experiencing two world wars and involving themselves deeply in several of the groundbreaking intellectual and artistic movements of the time. Moving to Paris with Moore in the 1920s marked the beginning of a new chapter in both their life and their work, both written and visual.

For the purposes of this chapter I will only be covering the historical and cultural influences that are shown in Cahun’s photographs rather than in their writings or other work, though there is much overlap in the two as they were creating many of these works simultaneously.

**Dada and the Surrealists**

We cannot speak of the influence of the Surrealist movement on Cahun without first covering the influence of Dada, a movement that arose from the first World War and, though having faded into the background once Surrealism was established, made great impact on the art scene of Paris along with many other major cities around the world. The range of what is considered Dada goes from painting, photography, sculpture, collage, to theatre, poetry, and performance art; many of these mediums were used by Claude throughout their artistic career.
Dada was a movement that arose nearly a decade ahead of Surrealism and, unlike Surrealism, was a largely European phenomena as it was a direct response to the “insanities” of the world that were emerging from the first World War and is widely known as an anti-art art movement.\textsuperscript{54}

According to art history professor David Hopkins it is only out of convenience that art history as a whole generalizes Dada as “paving the way” for Surrealism. In reality it only did so in one location: the then-home of Claude Cahun, Paris. It is entirely possible that Cahun first found interest in Dadaism through the involvement of Arthur Caravan, nephew of Oscar Wilde who was close friends with Cahun’s uncle.\textsuperscript{55} Though they likely never met, as Caravan set off from the coast of Mexico en route to Buenos Aires in 1918 and was never seen again, Cahun very well could have heard of his involvement via word of mouth from either family or friends in the art scene in Paris.\textsuperscript{56}

Cahun was, first and foremost, a writer, just as the Surrealist movement started off at first as a literary movement.\textsuperscript{57} Surrealism was founded on the basis of the exploration of human nature and the subconscious through the process of psychoanalysis, the dissection of gender and sexuality being a natural part of the movement’s progression.\textsuperscript{58} Cahun employed Surrealist techniques in their writing, poetry, photography, and performance while also carrying with them

\textsuperscript{55} Shaw, \textit{Exist Otherwise}, 26
\textsuperscript{56} David Hopkins, 41.
\textsuperscript{57} David Hopkins, 18.
\textsuperscript{58} David Hopkins, 22-23
the Dadaist ideologies of the indeterminacy and constant flux of the self as well as the artistic technique of the photomontage.

The Surrealist focus on the works of Freud concerning the unconscious mind and sexuality also fits in perfectly with Cahun’s interest in sexology, the then contemporary scientific study of gender and sexuality.

Havelock Ellis and Studies in Sexology

Sexology, the scientific, rather than political or social, study of the many aspects of human sexuality including sexual development, sexual relationships, and sexual and gender identity, experienced a boom in popular interest during the “sexual emancipation” that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The movement began with Psychopathia Sexualis published by Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing in 1886. Psychopathia Sexualis is the work most commonly considered to be the publication that established the study as a true scientific discipline.\(^{59}\)

Most notable of sexology at the time was not only its acknowledgement of homosexuality, bisexuality, and gender non-conformity, but it’s more often than not a portrayal of such identities in a neutral to positive light. At the helm of this area of study in England was physician, psychologist and writer Henry Havelock Ellis, known better simply as Havelock Ellis (February 2nd 1859-July 8th 1939). In 1896, Ellis published Sexual Inversion, a medical textbook on homosexuality co-authored by John Addington Symonds and printed initially in

German. Later, when translated, it became the first medical textbook in the English language that focused on homosexuality and the concept of “sexual inverts”. ⁶⁰

Sexual inversion is the inversion of traditional gender roles in men and women, sexually inverted men preferring traditionally female interests and clothing and vice versa for sexually inverted women. This concept of a person being “born into the wrong body” resembles strongly the modern-day (somewhat stereotypical) concept of transgender, which at that point in time was not yet a concept. Sexual inverts were also sometimes seen as a third gender in and of itself.

In 1929 Cahun translated Ellis’ book The Woman in Society from English to French for publication, from that moment forward his studies and philosophical writings on sexuality and gender were always holding a space in Cahun’s mind. ⁶¹ They would later group Ellis along with iconic historical thinkers such as Socrates and da Vinci.

The occasion of stumbling upon something so incredibly validating to a person such as Cahun cannot be emphasized enough. You can be yourself and act on your own outside of anyone else’s conceptions and still be personally contempt, but to find such positive validation of who you are, especially from someone outside of that identity, is comforting in a way that is truly indescribable in words.

In one of the first edition copies of Cahun’s Disavowles there is an inscription on the title page from Cahun themselves, addressed to English physician and writer Havelock Ellis, reading

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“To Havelock Ellis who has been a warm light on my desolate path, to the master I admire and love, to the friend who never failed me.”

This quote, though short in length and, on the surface, nothing but a quick message from one friend to another, in my own opinion contains so much more. To Cahun, Havelock Ellis could have in all probability been a saving grace for the young artist struggling with their identity, and his writings being a prime driving force behind their exploration of gender identity.

Chapter Three: Catalogue of Selected Works

For the formal and contextual analysis portion of this paper I have chosen fifteen separate portraits taken and separated them into what I see as the three main phases of their work in self-portraiture; phase one taking place from about 1908 to 1920 in Nantes, France, phase two from 1920 to 1937 in Paris, France, and phase three from 1937 to 1954 on the Isle of Jersey in the English Channel.

I have selected these specific works, some over Cahun’s more well-known portraits, because upon viewing them I felt that they are some of the best examples of their personal exploration of their own gender identity and presentation. Many of these were seldom to never

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discussed in depth in my research materials, and many I feel to be horribly overlooked in the overall scholarly exploration of the work of Claude Cahun.


This first example of self-portraiture from Cahun is one of their earliest, taken at age 20, that incorporated the use of symbolism as well as their knowledge of classical literature. The portrait shows Cahun lying on their back on what could be a bed, table, or even a few chairs based on the parts of the furniture that can be seen in the background. Their body is covered by a blanket or sheet, leaving only their head visible resting on a white pillow with their hair fanned out around their head. From the rectangle drawn on the print it is evident that Cahun intended for the portrait to be only a close-up of their head and hair on a completely white background, the white blanket covering their body up to their neck intended to blend in to the white pillow. Cahun looks directly into the camera at the viewer with a somewhat emotionless, sorrowful, or worried expression.

Upon viewing, this portrait instantly calls to mind depictions of the head of Medusa, the most popular and well known of that being Caravaggio’s *Medusa* (1597, oil on mounted canvas, Uffizi, Florence). The icon of Medusa after being beheaded by hero Perseus has been used since classical antiquity as a way to ward off evil, and, beginning in the early 20th century, was adopted by feminist groups as a symbol of female rage.
Cahun, being well read in classical mythology, would have likely been familiar with the tale of Medusa as well as the use of her symbol throughout classical history, and the growing popularity of the feminist movement would have also revived the interest in Medusa as a symbol. Being a victim of abuse, both physical and verbal, Cahun could likely highly relate to Medusa’s story, as many non-male scholars have seen Medusa as the victim rather than the monster. By presenting their own head as the head of Medusa it shows that they have been beaten down, broken, and abused but, much like Medusa in the myth who could still turn living things to stone even after the beheading, Cahun was signifying that their power and importance could be found not in their body, which they despised, but in their mind. Medusa is both male and female, phallic snakes and vaginal mouth.


Photograph.

116mm x 87mm.

Jersey Heritage Archives: JHT/1995/00015/j

The self-portrait in an ivy garland seems like a rather simple portrait at first, but I believe that it holds so much more in terms of symbolism and signals the beginning of Cahun slipping into varying identities as they struggle to find their own.

Cahun’s hair is either styled up or cut into a short bob and on their head they wear an ivy garland, some of the ivy also wrapped around their shoulders on top of the fur collar they wear. It is a portrait that only shows their head and shoulders against a blank wall or backdrop. As
discussed in the first chapter, the French at the time took great pride in being able to trace themselves back to the great classical Greece, giving them a sense of nationalism and superiority. Cahun’s mother was known to hold these values and aggressively trying to impose them on Cahun as a small child. Now, not only is Cahun emulating classical Greece, but emulating the gods that were worshiped in classical Greece, specifically the gods Apollo and Dionysus, commonly depicted wearing a laurel wreath and a grapevine wreath respectively. Apollo, considered one of the most important and well-recognized of the Greek gods, is seen as the Greek ideal of the masculine beauty: youthful and athletic with no facial hair. As one of the most important gods there were many things associated with him including the sun, light, music, art, and the muses. Dionysus is the Greek god of wine, fertility, grapes, and theatre, and while not as important as Apollo was still a major figure in Greek culture thanks to the importance of wine to Greek society and social life. Dionysus is commonly depicted one of two ways: either as an older, fat, bearded man or, more important in this case, a more androgynous youth, the descriptor used repeatedly in various sources being “man-womanish”.  

Cahun most likely formed a connection to Dionysus via this depiction, taking great interest in the gender ambiguity of such a well-known and powerful mythological figure.

*Photographic print.*

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63Alireza Korangy, Hanadi Al-Samman, Michael Beard, *The Beloved in Middle Eastern Literatures: The Culture of Love and Languishing*, 278
L’Image de la Femme is, in my opinion, most likely the first self-portrait of theirs to deal directly with gender and gender identity. Cahun’s hair is in a short, wavy bob and they are dressed in what can be seen in another portrait is a sailor suit or something similar, as opposed to a school uniform (a skirt implied) which one might see it as at first glance. They sit at a school desk which has two books, one of which they are reading, and what appears to be a clock, pencil box, or thermos on the surface. The scene is set in front of a seemingly dotted or diamond-patterned curtain or cloth. Cahun is shown to be in deep study of the book they read, the title unknown, ignoring the book underneath, the title fully visible as L’Image de la femme, or The Image of Woman, an art history catalogue of depictions of women and the female figure throughout art history.

Cahun knew from a young age that they were never going to be able to fit in to society’s idea of femininity or womanhood. They described a great relief when their father told them that marriage was not a requirement for them, calling the choice to not get tied down in such a way a “privilege”. 64 I fully agree with Jennifer Shaw’s reading of this portrait; that is “thematizes [their] early and continuing skepticism of gender roles.” 65

4-Claude Cahun, Self Portrait (hand on breast), 1916.

Photographic print.

65 Shaw, Exist Otherwise, p. 13
The body, and how it is presented and viewed both by the public and whomever the body belongs to, is obviously a major part of gender identity and “placement” into the two categories of man and woman. This self-portrait, taken in 1916, features Cahun in an outdoor, grassy area seated on the ground against a stone wall. Their hair is much shorter than in the last portrait reviewed and in even more of an androgynous style. They are dressed in what seems to be a toga-type dress, which is white and tied at their right shoulder, leaving their left bare. Cahun’s expression is a negative one, almost mournful as they look down at their right breast which they hold with their left hand.

In their writing Cahun had expressed their unhappiness with their body, especially the parts of the body that were seen as gendered, breasts being one of, if not the major defining feature of a traditional female body (source-cite here at length). In the context of their classical knowledge, this gesture brings to mind the legend of the Amazonian women, a tribe of warrior women who, to better their abilities of archery, spear-throwing, and other forms of combat, would cut off their right breasts to increase dexterity.

In my opinion there are two different but similar ways to read this image; Cahun is directing negative feelings towards their chest as a way to convey their distaste of the feminine aspects of their body, the parts of them that label them a woman even when they don’t want to be, or that they are showing distaste towards the right breast that is still there, unlike those of the Amazonian women, a sign that they will never be able to live up to the expectations to these godlike women of Greek myth.
4- Claude Cahun, Self Portrait *(in profile, sitting cross legged)*, 1920.

Photographic print.

7cm x 6cm.

Jersey Heritage Archive, JHT/1995/00032/a

Claude Cahun pictured sitting on the floor cross-legged in profile while wearing oversized, ambiguous clothing with their arms crossed. Their head has been completely shaved. The contrast in the photo is high, leaving intense shadows and not much detail in some areas. The portrait is a direct homage to a portrait of their father, putting a spotlight on the distinct Jewish features that the two share. Their sickly look could be contributed to the high shadow contrast, but seeing as Cahun did throughout their life struggle with eating disorders and was known to be severely anorexic at around this time period, it is an accurate depiction of how they looked in their day-to-day life when the portrait was taken.\(^{66}\)

This portrait is a direct reference to a portrait of their father done in the same exact fashion and composition\(^{67}\). When comparing the two portraits, the familial resemblance between the two is stunning. Through this, even though I have never been able to find a photograph of their mother (there are few to none of the family posing together for a traditional family portrait), I can say that in all likelihood they took the most after their father much to the dismay of their mother, who had a vocal and open hatred of their Jewish features.

\(^{66}\) Shaw, 33

\(^{67}\) Shaw, 26
Out of the two parents, it is their father who seems to have the best relationship with them (although when compared to how their mother treated them, the bar for a good parental relationship was set relatively low). This can easily explain Cahun’s preference for viewing themselves as a more masculine person rather than a feminine one (this is something I feel that lasted through their entire life, even as they started presenting as more feminine in Jersey towards the end of their life; it was something done more as an attempt at conformity for their as well as Moore’s safety, especially under German occupation). By showing themselves as extremely similar or even the exact same as their father, they are, by extension, distancing themselves from their mother and, by extension, the concept of motherhood itself as well as other gendered expectations that were given to them.

Sources:


Photographic print.

12cm x 8cm.
Jersey Heritage Archives: JHT/1995/00026/p

As in the previous portrait, Cahun is seen here with a shaved head and somewhat oversized clothes. They are looking directly into the camera with a blank expression as they stand against a large plain stone wall.

The backdrop of the stone reflects the unassuming and plainness of Cahun and their clothes.

6-Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, Self Portrait (reflected in mirror), 1928.
Photographic print.
179mm x 237 mm.
Jersey Heritage Archives: JHT/1995/00030/g

Cahun is pictured at a 3/4th view in front of a mirror, both Cahun and their reflection visable. Cahun wears a checkered shirt or jacket, the collar of which they hold up as if beginning to turn away and hide their face from the viewer. Their hair is short but not shaved; it has grown out a bit from being completely cut off.

The portrait leads the viewer to recall the historically traditional images of a woman at a mirror or vanity, but instead of gazing adoringly at their own reflection they are looking away from the mirror directly into the camera with a defensive and accusatory gaze at the viewer. Real-world Cahun seems to be turning away from the viewer, in the process of pulling up their jacket lapel to further cover their body while their reflection seems to be opening the jacket, in the process of exposing themselves to the viewer.
7-Claude Cahun, *Self Portrait (with bamboo)*, 1925.

Photographic print.

12cm x 9 cm.

Jersey Heritage Archives: JHT/1995/00015/y

This portrait references the circus strongman archetype that was relatively common at the time. Cahun stands outside in front of a patch of bamboo and wears a bathing suit or leotard with a belt around their waist, much like what weightlifters and strongmen wear while performing. They also stand with a strong, confident, masculine posture; one hand on their hip, the other raised as if resting on something they are holding on their back (the archival photo is of too low a quality for whatever it is to be seen), chest puffed out and standing on their tiptoes. Cahun also wears an Asian style farmer’s hat, a connection to the bamboo that they are posed in front of, continuing the theme.

In my research I have yet to see this specific portrait mentioned when analyzing the more “gender bending” aspects of Cahun’s work, or any of Cahun’s work in general. It is understandably easy to overlook when seen alongside so many other of their portraits, their obvious planning, set up, and specific composition making this one seem like just a quick, almost candid, snapshot of Cahun enjoying a nice sunny day outdoors. I see this as something much more: a predecessor for the arguably much more impactful and memorable series of portraits from 1927 *Don’t Kiss Me I’m In Training* which feature Cahun in one of their most iconic
costumes as a dandy circus strongman. These portraits display a sharp contrast between the hyermasculine and hyperfeminine, a breaking of societal norms with the norms themselves.

I believe that this photo deserves much more attention from scholars, as it is a clear precursor to their most iconic series of portraits, which I have concluded also show direct influence from a series of portraits of internationally famous strongman and body builder Eugen Sandow, who’s death in 1925, the same year this portrait was taken, could have triggered the thought in Cahun’s mind that lead to them exploring this concept in their visual work. It shows that Cahun was fully aware of and exploring the various different “faces” of femininity and masculinity of their time, tearing them apart to later build them back up again into something that is instantly recognizable to viewers while at the same time being something completely and utterly new, almost making the very concept of societal gender norms (and societal norms in general) into the realm of the uncanny.

8-Claude Cahun, _Self Portrait (kneeling, naked, with mask), 1928._

*Photographic print.*

*118mm x 88mm.*

*Jersey Heritage Archives: JHT/1995/00030/t*

Cahun sitting in an unspecified space, either outside or close to a window in sunshine on a quilt on the floor which is also being used as a backdrop. The artist wears a black mask with white or lighter colored eyebrows and blush on the cheeks, the mask only covering their eyes and nose. Their hair is buzzed short and save for the mask they are completely nude, posing in such a
way as to cover their chest and pubic area, leaving their biological gender a mystery to the viewer, along with, to some extent, their identity as their face is also covered.

9-Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Self Portrait (double exposure in rock pool), 1928.*

Photographic print.

127mm x 176mm.

*Jersey Heritage Archive: JHT/1995/00036/b*

This self-portrait is, relative to the other examples given, is by far the one that implicates the surrealist aesthetic the most. This portrait, much like the previous in the mirror, shows us two Claudes, but instead of reflection uses the technique of double exposure. The left and right of the photo is flanked by two rock walls with water in the center, in the water floating the two Claudes, the one on the left upside down and the right right side up, both facing away from each other in profile. (though it is completely possible that it could have been meant to be viewed the other way around or having no correct orientation to view it at all). Both of these Claudes are fully nude, left Claude seeming to have a rope or unknown material wrapped and tied around their chest, their left arm reaching behind them to grab the ankles of right Claude, the ankles being what is bound on right Claude. Right Claude’s hands are not visible and the positioning of their body suggests that they are beginning to pull themselves out of the water, while left Claude appears to be using their right hand to hang on to the rock wall to keep themselves secure while they float.

Photographic print.

11.8cm x 8.9cm.

**Jersey Heritage Archive: JHT/1995/00030/h**

This portrait features Claude in full theatre costume as the character Monsieur in *Banlieu*. It is almost an extreme close up, at least when compared to other portraits we have covered; their head and face taking up a majority of the frame with only the top part of the collar of their costume visible. Their hair is buzzed short and eyebrows appear to be drawn on, entirely possible as they were known to shave their eyebrows along with their head.

Even though this is a close up where Cahun’s face is fully visible, this is still an image of a mask. This is an image of them not as themselves but as a character they play. I believe that this portrait, along with their other theatre portraits, are just as much part of Cahun’s exploration of their gender and identity as their privately made portraits are. I think of this in the same way that I think of how Halloween has sometimes been referred to as the pride before pride, as Halloween night was the safest time for members of the queer community, especially anyone transgender or gender non-conforming, because the holiday was a prime excuse for someone to “cross dress” as a fun “joke”, essentially being able to express themselves truly without (or with much less than usual) fear of persecution or violence against them.

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68 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 88
I see part of their interest in acting as the taking of an opportunity to be more public and open with their experiments in gender presentation or explore even more extreme, exotic, or unusual identities or manners of presentation.


Photographic print.

10.6cm x 8.6cm.

Jersey Heritage Archive: JHT/1995/00029/1

Photo of Claude Cahun taken from a distance, they are standing on top of a rocky hill next to a sign reading “PRIVATE NO PATH”. Cahun stands next to the sign with their hands on their hips, looking down at the viewer somewhat defiantly. They wear a sleeveless sundress and possibly sunglasses, their hair most likely in an updo.

In my research I have not come across any discussion on this picture, which I find surprising due to its connection to their early manuscript *The Uranian Games*, which included a hand-drawn note on the cover of a warning sign reading “no trespassing”. This is a direct reference to their identity as a non-heterosexual individual, them standing in such a confident and defiant manner next to the sign (perhaps standing guard in front of the area behind it?) showing that they are now aware and confident in their identity as a homosexual, which was at the time seen as neither man or woman but a third gender entirely.69

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69 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 72
Photographic print.
8.3cm x 6cm.

*Jersey Heritage Archive: JHT/1995/00031/a*

A photo of Claude Cahun dressed in military style clothing in front of miscellaneous shrubbery, standing on a concrete seawall that was constructed near their home during the German occupation. They are holding an unknown round object or featureless mask to hide their face. The words on the wall cannot be fully read but from other photographs we know it reads “private property”. This was most likely taken at the same time as their self-portrait with their cat, a skull, and gravestones double exposed in the photo.

Even though this is not a portrait of Cahun as themselves but (most likely) as the Solider with No Name, the alter-ego they adopted to resist Nazi forces, it is still a self-portrait. Cahun’s work is about the exploration and discovery of the self, in the process both removing and trying on different masks, both literal and figurative, to further explore who they really were. Their portrait as the solider is still a portrait of themselves, just a different aspect of themselves.

Photographic print.
Cahun is pictured among bushes and plants with a cemetery visible in the background. Their hair seems to be in an updo with a headband and they wear a single dark glove on their right hand. They hold an unspecified object, most likely the same object used to obscure their face in their portrait as the Soldier with No Name, over their right breast with both hands. Their face is facing upwards towards the sun, eyes closed or squinted with a slight smile on their face. They seem to be wearing a white or light-colored dress.

I see a direct connection between this portrait and their *Self portrait (hand on breast)* (fig. 4) taken back in 1916. But the similarities are shadowed when compared to the contrasts— in their 1916 portrait Cahun seems mournful, depressed, and what could be read as ashamed as they hold their right breast with their bare hand and gaze down at their body disapprovingly.

In comparison the 1947 portrait can be read as a direct inversion of the 1916 portrait, opposite but complimentary to one another. In the 1947 portrait Cahun sits in a position similar to that of which they sat in in their earlier photo but this time holding their face upwards into the light of the sun with closed eyes and a calm or content expression on their face. If this is in fact an homage or revisitation of their earlier work, a narrative can be seen; Cahun has grown from trying to hide their body away in disgust to embracing it, the covering of the breast still signaling residual discomfort with the “gendered” parts of their body.
Both Marcel Moore and Claude Cahun are shown in this photograph, both posing under a stone arch at the entrance of a garden, most likely at their farmhouse. They are both dressed in swimsuits, Moore in black and Cahun likely in white or a light-colored suit. Moore is on the left of the photo with Cahun on the right. There has been severe damage done to the photo specifically over the figure of Cahun, focusing specifically on their face and torso with heavy damage to the area of the hips and waist.

This photo is evidence that Cahun’s hate and discomfort with their own body is something that lasted throughout their entire life. In my opinion the damage done to the photo is far too specific and deliberate to have been an accident in printing. It was most likely done by Cahun themselves as I cannot imagine Moore ever doing something like that to an image of their partner, not at least without doing the same to their own image.

The damaged areas cover the most “gendered” parts of their body: the chest and groin area as well as their face, the features of which aren’t necessarily especially feminine but still a source of much mental anguish thanks to the abuse from her mother. The damage seems almost violent, and I can’t help to think of this as a form of self-harm, using the image of their body as an extension of their true body.

To read more into this concept of the destruction of their image as a traditionally female person, it would be worth it to consider Cahun’s age at the time the photo was taken.
Menstruation is a major part of the traditional female anatomy, and Cahun, being around the age of 60, would in all likelihood been approaching menopause or had already begun to experience it. This experience could have been an almost traumatic reminder of their gendered body and how outsiders would always see them: as a woman.


Photographic print.

8.6cm x 6.3cm.

*Jersey Heritage Archive: JHT/1995/00036/g*

Cahun is again pictured on the concrete seawall in front of various bushes and shrubs, this time with a double exposure of gravestones on either side of Cahun. They appear to be wearing the same clothes as in the previous photo but with the jacket open, giving them a more casual and every day look. Their left hand is by their side and their right is up towards their chin holding a cigarette, as if they were just about to or just had taken a drag from it. Between their feet sits one of their beloved cats named Nike. In the lower righthand corner of the photo is the skull of a human infant, the skull being either real or a replica is unknown.

Unlike the previous portrait of themselves as the solider with no name, this seems to be a full self portrait, though they are wearing the same clothes. This could have been done to show the closeness between themselves and their alter-ego of the solider. It is also a reminiscent outfit of that they described themselves wearing when they and Moore would distribute their propaganda around the Isle of Jersey. Due to the double exposure of the photograph they are
shown to stand among a row of grave markers, seeming to take the place of one of them in the row. Because this photo was most likely taken after the liberation of the island (the dates are still somewhat uncertain), this is likely a way of showing their victory over what was, for the longest time, certain death at the hands of German forces. They are again pictured near a no trespassing sign, this time reading ‘private property’, another connection to the concept introduced in their Uranian Games manuscript and referenced again in their self-portrait at the top of a rocky hill.

**Conclusion**

The work of Claude Cahun and their partner and artistic collaborator Marcel Moore give us an up close and personal look into an otherwise deeply private and intimate aspect of their life: their gender identity, exploration, and presentation. The exact specifics of their self and identity will, however, always remain uncertain; a solid categorization made impossible due to the perpetual evolution of language over the passage of time as well as the nebulous spectrum of the concepts of gender identity and presentation.

To quote Oscar Wilde, “to define is to limit”, and the attempts of scholars and historians to place Cahun in a box will always inevitably erase a part of them that, while integral to who they were, can in no way, shape or form fit into that box. Cahun’s body of work that we have
available to it now is just a fraction of what it could have been or what it was prior to the German occupation, making it even harder to pin down the elusive artist.
Figures

Figure 1: Claude Cahun, *Head on Pillows*, 1914, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 2: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (with ivy garland)*, 1915, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 3: Claude Cahun, *L’Image de la Femme*, 1915, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 4: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (hand on breast)*, 1916, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 5: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (near a Granite Wall)*, 1916, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 6: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (in profile, sitting cross legged)*, 1920, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 7: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (with bamboo)*, 1925, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 8: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (reflected in mirror)*, 1928, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 9: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (kneeling naked, with mask)*, 1928, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 10: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (double exposure in rock pool)*, 1928, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archive
Figure 11: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait as Monsieur in Manlieu*, 1929, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 12: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (on rocks near notice)*, 1945, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 13: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (holding object over right breast)*, 1947, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 14: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (mask obscures face)*, 1947, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 15: Claude Cahun, *Self portrait (with cat, skull and gravestones)*, 1947, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
Figure 16: Claude Cahun, *Marcel Moore and Claude Cahun*, 1950, photograph, Jersey Heritage Archives
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