

ABSTRACTS

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What and When was Caribbean Modernism?

Day 1

Visual Modernism

Jerry Philogene

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Title: Beyond Vodou Iconography: Luce Turnier, A Haitian Modernist

Abstract:

What does it mean to situate the artwork of a transnational, feminist, Haitian modernist painter within mid- to late-20th century arts of the African diaspora? Turnier's vivid still-lives and landscape paintings created in Haiti and in Paris during the 1960s to the 1980s capture the symbolic and material forms of Haiti. In contrast, her monochromatic, muted-toned portraits and line figure drawings of working-class and middle-class Haitians reflect an interest in Abstract Expressionism and Black Atlantic Modernism. My paper presentation will demonstrate how her artwork was influenced by African American modernist artists such as James Porter, Eldzier Cortor, and Lois Mailou Jones. Their muted palette and humanizing depictions of Haiti and its people influenced Turnier's pictorial aesthetic and abstract mark-making practice. Correspondingly, Turnier's Atlantic crossings were central to her modernist artistic formation, a cultural mixing of Haitian Creole – formed in the Afrodiasporic communities of Haiti, Paris, and later, New York. Situating Turnier's work alongside and in conversation with Porter, Cortor, and Jones reveals transatlantic reverberations during a historical moment when the image of the Black figure was used to voice concerns around imperialism, colonization, and racialized identity.

This project is both a social art history and feminist art history. A careful examination of her portraits, paying close attention to her use of pose, color gradation, form, and representation disrupts the overdetermined focus on Vodou iconography and the overt sexualization of the Black female body. This presentation will focus on an artist who may not have been considered a feminist at the time. Nevertheless, in her paintings and drawings, exhibited a feminist ethos within formal modernist aesthetic practices and the complex nature of racial and class representation.

This presentation makes three essential interventions. First, it will address the interconnections between the aforementioned twentieth-century Black modernist painters and Turnier. Second, it will highlight the feminist aspirations embedded in her artwork. Third, it will illuminate the complex social and visual processes of representation of Black people through the lens of modernism. Together, these interventions will frame Turnier's work within a modernist discourse and highlight her contributions to transatlantic visual aesthetic that reframes an African diasporic art historiography, which includes Haiti's aesthetic contributions to Black intellectual thought and artistic production.

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Title: Unraveling Modernity in the Dutch Caribbean: The Struggles of Frank Martinus Arion, Postcolonial Intellectual, and Author

Abstract:

How can we approach modernity from the perspective of the Dutch Caribbean islands, which are neither colonies nor fully autonomous postcolonial countries? Despite their potential to reveal much about the legacy of colonialism, the fraught relationship between colonialism and modernity, and the self-conceptions of Caribbean societies, scholars have yet to widely engage with this region, perhaps due to the languages of Creole Papiamentu and Dutch and the islands' unusual or queer national sovereignty status within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This paper argues that the unique geopolitical situation of the Dutch Caribbean islands merits examination, particularly in the context of a 'triangular trade' that involved the transportation and sale of enslaved Africans to the Americas, the production and shipment of goods from the Americas to Europe, and the resulting economic growth and prosperity in the Dutch Republic. This triangular trade contributed to the development of ideas of modernity by portraying the islands as backward and in need of development, and this perception continues to reverberate into the present. To explore these themes, this paper focuses on the work of postcolonial intellectual Frank Martinus Arion (Curaçao, 1936–2015) and how he sought to make sense of the postcolonial present and how he fought for Papiamentu. This language, he believed, would throw off its shackles and allow Curaçaoans to express themselves and their culture freely. Specifically, the paper examines Arion's 1995 novel *De Laatste Vrijheid* (The Last Freedom), in which a trans* volcano is portrayed as a threat to postcolonial nation-building and the introduction of the Creole language in schools. The volcano is constructed as a male-to-female trans* person and sometimes as a cisgender woman, reproducing heteronormative and sexist projects. This paper challenges this construction by showing how the volcano, portrayed as a trans* person, can disrupt the world we know, both within and in relation to the "West," and offer new possibilities for being in the world. Through this case study, I explore how heteropatriarchy reinforces systems of power and dominance in the production of the nation-state and how the history of neocolonial and neoimperial states operating through colonial practices within modernity can be understood and challenged.

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Title: Allora & Calzadilla and the Planetary Consequences and Afterlives of Modernism

Abstract:

The main aim of this presentation is to examine the ways in which contemporary creative practices from the Caribbean are retooling and relocating the legacies of modernism and modernist aesthetics in the region. Over the last two decades, the work of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla has engaged with modernism in exhaustive ways, highlighting the consequences of the uneven power relations resulting from colonialism and neoliberalism in Puerto Rico. In this paper, I analyse work produced by the duet of artists during the last ten years side by side the Warwick Research Collective (WrEC)'s idea of modernism as the result of the combined and uneven dynamics of capitalism at a planetary scale. Instead of positing Allora & Calzadilla's work as a confirmation of the intricacies of the entanglement between modernism and capitalism advanced by WrEC, this presentation will focus on exploring the potential of contemporary artistic practice to expand and nuance current debates on modernist aesthetics. My main argument is that the work of Allora & Calzadilla illuminates issues of universalism, authorship, autonomy, debt and planetary, more-than-human entanglements in fertile and productive ways.

Erica Moiah James

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Title: The Sphere of the Marvelous: Caribbean Modernism in the World

Abstract:

In 1961 the Haitian artist Hervé Télémaque left New York and the Art Students League for Paris. Though the League had been a draw for a long list of artists from the Caribbean since the 1920s seeking training without discrimination, including the Cuban artist Amelia Peláez, Jamaican Mavis Pusey, Trinidadian Boscoe Holder and Bahamian Maxwell Taylor, Télémaque found the ambient racism of the New York art world beyond The League, and its disregard of the creative output of Black artists untenable. Unwilling to return to Duvalierist Haiti, Télémaque sailed for France, with its own complicated history with negrophilia and a modern blackness defined by artistic and intellectual possibilities that were often Pan-African scope.

By the time Télémaque arrived in Paris another Haitian exile, Marie Claude "Toto" Bissainthe had already begun making her mark in theatre and music. Along with her close friends the French Guadeloupean filmmaker Sarah Maldoror and Ivorian author and filmmaker Timite Bassori, she co-founded the first Black theatre company in the city, Les Griots, a company that would put together a formidable oeuvre and perform at the first World Festival of the Arts in Dakar, 1966.

This paper is part of a larger project that explores the phenomenology of Caribbean visual, tonal, performative, and philosophical modernism in an increasingly Pan-African world during the twentieth century. The project engages Caribbean Modernism as a generative concept through singular artistic practices within complex formal and informal institutional spaces like the Art Students League (1920-70) and the Bob Blackburn Printmaking workshop (1960-90) in New York; The Caribbean Artists Movement and Black Arts Movement in London, and Britain more broadly (1960-90); University of the West Indies (1968) and the Edna Manley College (1985-2005) in Jamaica; and the Institute Arte Superior (1985-2000) in Cuba.

Through Télémaque and Bissainthe, this paper explores the contours of Caribbean Modernism within a Pan African network of organizations, artists and collectives working along a NY- Paris- and continental Africa nexus, bracketed by the Caribbean in the late 1950s- 1960s. It examines Caribbean artists approach to modern artistry and the ways their iterations of modern art, imbricates with and enunciates within a global Caribbean shaped by the work, vision and cultural politics of Caribbean theorists Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Walter Rodney.

Lázaro Lima

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Title: Seeing Modernism, Intuiting Futurity: On the Visual Cultures of the Caribbean Sensorium

Abstract:

“Seeing Modernism, Intuiting Futurity” proposes an engagement with Caribbean literary and visual cultures that links Hispanophone, Anglophone, and Francophone modernisms within a shared conceptual vocabulary united by themes and topics (“the Caribbean sensorium”) that center Black Atlantic aesthetics as a rhetorical strategy for both forging Caribbean freedoms, and decentering the aesthetic and political influence of the metropolises.

Lindsay Twa

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Title: Meeting Modernism: Haitian Art, Black Diasporan Art Histories, and Pan-African Festivals

Abstract:

This presentation will focus on twentieth century Haitian modern art as a case study for anchoring a series of questions about the artistic networks and infrastructures of Caribbean modern art. As such, I want to explore not only the “what and when was Caribbean modernism,” but also, the “how.” The story of modernism in European art is a narrative that privileges an avant garde who challenged the traditions of high art in the name of both radical innovation and social critique. Yet behind these individual iconoclasts, there were art-world infrastructures and networks that enabled their work to become visible and valued, and thereby triumphantly enter collections and the canon of art history.

At stake here is how artists come to be known, and the mechanisms by which their art comes to be valued and valorized. This form of knowledge production is often proscribed and circumscribed for artists working in the geographic and racialized margins of the global art world. This presentation will illuminate the individuals and networks that worked to support the entrance of Haitian modern art into the global art world. From the ecstatic writings of Selden Rodman on the Haitian art “renaissance” and its “miracle in Haiti,” to the pronouncements of Surrealist André Breton about Haitian modernism’s revolutionary potential, Haitian modern art seemed well-positioned to break through into the canon of high modernism. This was, however, neither an easy nor a linear process, and, in many ways, still remains an aspirational endeavor. As such, I want to call attention to a number of artists turned curators and art historians who worked to create exhibitions, support research on, and expand the network of art world support for Haitian modern artists, specifically, and Caribbean visual arts practices more broadly. Along the way, they needed to articulate what constituted Haitian modern art, define high art against notions of tourist art, work within and against high modernism’s deployment of primitivist concepts, and build a network and arts infrastructure from the ground up.

My case study is a narrative that expands outwards from the Centre d'Art of Port-au-Prince, to Howard University in Washington, DC, and back again. It will include the early art scholarship produced by non-academically trained art historians, such as the work of African-American painters James Amos Porter and Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, both of whom worked to produce more expansive histories of Haitian modern art, and, in the case of Jones Pierre-Noël, also championed specifically Caribbean women artists. Additionally, these artist-scholars also worked through the newly emergent structures of global pan-African festivals that brought together artists, performers, intellectuals, and curious travelers. These festivals, such as the Caribbean Festival of Creative Arts (CARIFESTA) (1972) and Diaspora-2: 2ieme Festival de la diaspora africaine du nouveau monde (1979), were conceived in the spirit of solidarity, and with goals of fostering dialogues between artists of the Black diaspora. These cultural gatherings were also outward-facing endeavors to demonstrate the excellence of Black and Caribbean art, and were organized with the explicit goals of building an audience for this work and of producing sustainable infrastructures for the emergent Caribbean modern art world.

Ultimately, this talk will trace the expansive network of individuals, ideas, institutions, and infrastructures that worked to create and support a distinctly Haitian modern art world—one that rippled outwards to bolster a greater Caribbean and Black Diasporan art world that could be in dialogue with and also contest Euro-centric narratives and practices of modernism.

Petrina Dacres

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Title: The Black Eyes of Modernism

Abstract:

The essay considers the works of Jamaican artists, primarily sculptors, that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s. In reviewing the styles and conceptual interests of artists such as Edna Manley, Alvin Marriott and Ronald Moody, it demonstrates how they adapted modernism to their own professional and cultural interests. Their works are situated in the cultural, political and aesthetic concerns and pressures faced by artists in Jamaica during this time. And, are contextualised in the aesthetic and social movements that occurred in the wider Caribbean and African Diaspora worlds. The essay hopes to show the different inflections of modernism and to think about the different cultural contexts through which modernism was articulated.

Day 2

Literary Modernism

Daphne Lamothe

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**Title: Fugue and Fugitivity/Form and Formalism:
M. NourbeSe Phillip's Zong!**

Abstract:

M. NourbeSe Phillip has described Zong!, her epic poem on the Middle Passage as, “equal parts song, moan, shout, oath, ululation, curse, and chant;” as well as an “anti-narrative lament.” Phillip composed Zong! entirely from the deconstructed language of an eighteenth-century legal case related to the murder of a group of Africans as they were being transported on a slave ship. Thus, history and historical consciousness inspires a text that experiments in striking ways with poetic language and form. Historicity exists in generative tension alongside of a modernist poetics that calls for the inhabitation of what I will frame as an aesthetic temporality.

Building on the work of writers and thinkers like Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant, Simon Gikandi and Linda Hutcheon, I read Zong! as an instantiation of a longer tradition literary modernism emanating from the Caribbean, one that reckons with the historical and ontological ruptures inaugurated by slavery and European colonial expansion. I will consider the ways that Phillip's turn toward experimental writing and abstractionism grows from, and reaches beyond, a longer tradition of narrative critique of colonial forms of racial and gendered violence. Moreover, I will explore the pressures that the formalist concerns of an aesthetic framing places on our understanding of the role of historicity within critical and theoretical articulations of Caribbean subjectivity and consciousness.

Faith Smith

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Title: Conduits of Memory

Abstract:

In Modernism's Wake: Styles and Infrastructures of Caribbean Artistic and Intellectual Practice

Responding to the prompt in the title of this project, and to the invitation extended by Tao Leigh Goffe's discussion of the 1950s soundsystem (“Bigger than the Sound” 2020), my paper explores forms of sociality and aesthetics generated by technology – specifically, the standpipe and its adjacent structures: wells, tanks, pit toilets and chimneys, indoor plumbing and sewerage lines. Never just “neutral conduits” (Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise* 2008: 6) -- of water and waste, for instance – technology's presumed capacity to create awe is exploited by colonial authorities, while colonial subjects navigate the social hierarchies mapped out by the provision and distribution of technology. The artist/curator Ibrahim Mahama invites us to consider how the derelict object scorned by the modern postcolonial citizen offers rich opportunities for reassessing the successive economic dreams of nationalism and neoliberal capital. In recent fiction such as Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* (2004) the sewer line's alignments with torture during and after slavery (recalled in the novel's present of the 1950s) press us to inquire into the sometimes nostalgic recuperation of the standpipe in particular, in visual culture and on social media. Time. Memory. Form. While my title is conduits of memory, then, I mean something like a portal of experience that may in fact not be “remembered” at all -- because it is too fraught (terrifying, humiliating) or because it is a reminder of a defunct reality that is thankfully behind us.

Yra Van Dijk

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Title: Dutch-Caribbean Modernism: Post from the start

Abstract:

As so many intellectuals from the Caribbean, early 20th century writers in the Dutch colonial sphere mostly went to Europe to attend university and travel before returning westwards. The cosmopolitan attitude of authors such as Cola Debrot, Albert Helman, Anton de Kom and later Astrid Roemer immersed them in an international modernism, and simultaneously in an anti-colonial paradigm. Divergent influences thus created a Dutch Caribbean modernism that was 'post' from the beginning. There is a critical modernism with a post-structural emphasis on the subject as embedded in frameworks of power, language and technologies. De Kom's sharp critique of systems of knowledge and historiography for example, predated Fanon and Foucault. Poets such as Ashetu and Shrinivási appropriated the modernist poetic form for posthumanist works of resistance with reference to indigenous geographies and idioms. Debrot deconstructed the oppositions between the centres and peripheries of modernity, making the Leeward islands a centre of global capitalist trade in his narrative. And after the independence of Surinam, it was Astrid Roemer who rewrote the history of Surinam as a posthuman relational sphere, in which nature was both in contact with traditional European narratives, and infected too with colonial oppression and –sexual- violence. This paper will analyse this inherent post-ness of Dutch Caribbean modernism (Glissant, Appiah) in relation to the international cultural context of the rest of the region.

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Title: Performance and Migration in Puerto Rican “Modernist” or Avant-garde Aesthetics.

Presentation: “Not a *Moda* but a *Modo*: Agency, Temporality, and the Performance of Everyday Life in Hispanophone Caribbean Modernism”

Abstract:

Deploying the Cuban critic Roberto Fernández Retamar's claim that, unlike European modernist or avantgarde literary and artistic movements, the aesthetics of *negrismo* in the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén's work is not a “moda” (or fashion) but a “modo” (a way, a means, a path), this presentation will trace the dialogue that Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos and the Cubans Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima establish with European modernisms and avant-garde aesthetics as they seek to create a modern art that addresses their Caribbean cultural and social context. At a time of great social and political upheaval that ends with the demise of the anti-imperialist left and a great sense of pessimism about the potential for progressive social change, Palés Matos, Carpentier and Lezama Lima search for a modern artistic expression that will recover optimism in the creative potential for social and cultural change in their Caribbean/Latin American societies. In dialogue with European surrealism and Anglo-American high modernism, they will revise questions of temporality and subjective and collective agency and look for forms that will engage history by linking it to everyday life as a source of social creativity and resistance. In their work, gestures, movement, displacement, and migrations will become emblematic of this search for a creative potential that is rooted in the minimal expressions of everyday life—a search which in many ways can be seen as a precedent or antecedent for the contemporary aesthetic practices of writers and theorists of Caribbean art such as Edoardo Glissant.

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Title: Haitian Feminist Texts and the Contradictions of Modernity

Abstract:

Haitian author Yanick Lahens has called 20th and 21st century Haitian texts “a product of” and “a response to” modernity. Lahens writes: “We [Haiti] are both a product of this modernity, and a response to it. We are a recent civilization born from the mixing and meeting of the Atlantic and the Caribbean seas. *We question modernity because we see its contradictions and limitations.* From the very beginning, our existence has been a way of rethinking the universality of the Enlightenment.” This essay takes Lahens’s argument about modernity in order to sort through those contradictions and determine how they surface in the work of contemporary Haitian feminist artists and authors. Focusing on the work of Kettly Mars and Tessa Mars, I explore how literary and visual texts engage, resist, and even dwell in spaces of contradiction. In my view, how these cultural workers adopt an aesthetic of simultaneity operates as one way to navigate the contradictions Lahens mentions. Following the charge of this symposium, I am especially interested in how we might “characterize the forces that shape contemporary visual, literary, and intellectual discourse about injustice and the struggles against it” in relation to the idea of contradiction.

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Title: Driving the Wildebus: Creolising Moves in Dutch Caribbean Literature

Abstract:

In the *Poetics of Relation* Glissant posits *métissage* as ‘the meeting and synthesis of two differences’ while creolization is its superlative, ‘a limitless *métissage*,’ and its diffracted nature leads to unforeseeable consequences and adds new and original dimensions (Glissant 34). It is this practice which is applied by Edgar Cairo in the language of his work. Cairo uses Sranantongo, already a Creole language, to infiltrate and influence Dutch, creolising the colonial language (Cairo, *Ik Ga Dood* 17). Aware that the use of Sranantongo within the Dutch language was discouraged both in the Netherlands and Suriname, Cairo made deliberate moves to mix the languages on a grammatical and syntactical level (ibid).

Droomboot Have(n)loos (Dreamboot Harbourless/Ragged) is a novella about two brothers in Suriname. The two Black men try to realise their dream of making money by driving on the bus line. In a country where there is no government-organised public transport, theoretically anyone who can buy and drive a bus can operate on the bus line. In reality, there is fierce competition on the line, and the brothers are aware that none of the people accumulating wealth are Black. From the start the brothers’ efforts encounter opposition and sabotage from invisible enemies.

De Ferrari points out that the creolization present in the Caribbean has caused the formation of ‘purely relational societies’ that are based in the forced labour of the plantations (186). The clash between the two brothers, the other men on the bus line, and the Surinamese government (‘lanti’) is a situation which is a direct consequence of the plantation economy at the country’s origin. This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of this interaction, and the way in which Cairo utilises, challenges, and changes the colonial language through his use of Sranantongo and oral tradition.

Nadi Edwards

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Title: Apocalypse, Modernism, and Caribbean Literature: Notes Towards a Poetics of Catastrophe

Abstract:

This paper explores a particular strain of Caribbean literary modernism that is inflected by tropes of catastrophe and apocalypse. Focusing primarily on Anglophone Caribbean literary and popular cultural discourses produced during the last three decades of the twentieth century, and conceptually indebted to Gordon Rohlehr's recurring concern with the persistence of catastrophe as a central phenomenon in Caribbean history, it posits apocalyptic modernism as an unsettling and revisionary reading of the teleological imperatives of postcolonial creole nationalisms. Always visionary, often dystopian, and occasionally cynical, these aesthetic representations of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic events, experiences, and moments resonate with spectral intimations of history and uncanny temporalities to address the conjunctural crises of the period from 1970 to 2000.

The essay highlights the ways in which texts as diverse as Bob Marley and the Wailer's "Mr. Brown" and "Black Survivors," selected poems of Dennis Scott, Anthony McNeill, and Kamau Brathwaite *inter alia*, and Wilson Harris' novel, *Jonestown*, chart catastrophe via a syntax of haunted associations and intimations, and a symbolic schema of ghosts, duppies, duppy stories, desacralized universes, spiritual wastelands, and the epistemological and ontological sorceries that enshrine the plantation in contemporary discourses of resistance. The emergent poetics of catastrophe in these texts ultimately challenges certain shibboleths of postcolonial creole nationalist shibboleths regarding modernity, history, the nation state, and Caribbean subjectivities.