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ON PATRICIA KAERSENHOUT

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The Grounds of Erasure: Patricia Kaersenhout's Archival Vision

Patricia Kaersenhout's *Food for Thought* (2018) is composed of five collaged cotton screen prints that hang like standards (fig. 1). Narrow side panels edged with Dutch-made West African wax-printed textiles frame a larger central panel with female figures in a landscape.¹ A geography of circulating commodities (textiles, gold, enslaved Africans) frames the mobile image economy of the Caribbean. We see coconut trees, sugarcane, cotton fields, a vegetable garden—all references to the region's economic production and visual tropes that brought the Caribbean "into view" for European viewers. The destruction of indigenous communities, the clearing of the land, and the implementation of the plantation economy were geopolitical acts that were both masked and mirrored in the historical art conventions that arranged figures in the natural world to reinforce the idealization of the land and the naturalization of those who lived on it.²

This history of erasure, registered archivally and continued visually in the Caribbean, underpins Kaersenhout's understanding of social affliction. Exploring how these archival erasures have structured the suffering and experience of black and brown Caribbean women, Kaersenhout works speculatively to rupture these registers of denial and to envision alternative modes of representation.³ Accordingly, when we look at the central panel of these prints, we see the artist exploring the implications of this paradoxical visibility. First, she directs us to the objectification of the black female body through its conflation with meanings of the Caribbean landscape.⁴ This history frames her depiction of these five black feminist intellectuals: Claudia Jones, Suzanne Césaire, Elma van Franco, Gerty Archimede, and Paulette Nardal. While crucial to the development of Caribbean intellectual and political thought, they have often been marginalized from these histories.⁵ In *Food for Thought*, we see how the politics of a radical sort of visibility also bears the strictures of the very genealogy of erasure being transformed. In other words, these processes of erasure structure the very conditions of their disavowal.

A form of portraiture, the prints memorialize these women while responding to specific historical elisions, such as the Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris in 1956 that brought leading black intellectuals together to discuss issues of slavery, colonialism, and Negritude.⁶ While largely organized by black Caribbean women whose intellectual work also framed its debates,

it was the voices and intellectual concerns of black men that were centralized. Or consider this: Paulette Nardal—one of the first black women to study at the Sorbonne—and her sister, Jeanne, were the first intellectuals to theorize the key concepts of Negritude while organizing literary salons that brought together many black intellectuals in 1930s Paris. Yet it is Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas who have largely been credited as the fathers of the movement. Similarly, Suzanne Césaire and her critical writings, her involvement in the development of Afro-surrealism, and her role as editor of the journal *Tropiques* receive less attention than that given to her husband and his works. Elma van Francois, Claudia Jones, and Gerty Archimede were also significant activists and politicians whose contributions to Afro-Caribbean intellectual thought and black communism remain downplayed, marginalized, or forgotten.⁷ Thus Kaersenhout aligns herself with more recent developments in the field, as scholars begin to foreground the centrality of these women to our understanding of Caribbean radical thought and its legacies for the field of black studies as a whole.⁸



Figure 2. Patricia Kaersenhout, *Distant Bodies*, 2011; photoprints on fabric, 40 x 30 cm. Photograph by Tor Johnson. Courtesy of Gallery Wilfried Lents and the van Abbemuseum.



Figure 3. Patricia Kaersenhout, *The Soul of Salt*, 2016/2018; installation, 7500 kilos of sea salt. Palazzo Forcella de Seta, Manifesta 12, Palermo, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Food for Thought brings together two ongoing material investigations in Kaersenhout's practice: memorialization and invisibility. In *Distant Bodies* (2015), she created fabric collages imprinted with bodies of women who have been objectified and silenced by colonial Dutch photography (fig. 2). Beginning from the grounds of erasure, she resituates these women by giving them new backgrounds beyond the colonial archive, from where they ferociously return our gaze. In *The Soul of Salt* (2018), large piles of white salt symbolize the Atlantic Ocean and the tears shed by those forced to cross it (fig. 3). Materializing the very site of black negation, the accumulation of salt also visualizes a form of black radical freedom. It references an oral history retold by enslaved communities that by refusing to ingest salt, they could fly back to their homes in Africa. In the work's most recent iteration at Manifesta 12 in Palermo, a group of refugee women accompanied the

installation by singing the African American freedom song “Many Thousands Gone,” and viewers could take salt home. By historicizing the often antiblack “climate” around contemporary European immigration debates, Kaersenhout also centralizes the “universality” of the history of slavery to challenge the dissonance between self-image and reality in Dutch society where racial discrimination and colonial violence are denied yet continually restaged in public discourses.⁹

In *Food for Thought*, Kaersenhout uses portraiture to materialize the implications of archival erasure as, above all, embodied. Using a digital process of cutting and pasting, Kaersenhout draws on a vast body of Caribbean landscape imagery that is spliced with less accessible black-and-white photography of her central characters.¹⁰ In this sense, she works in, and from, the wound of erasure itself, to centralize the physical relationship of the five women to their imaginary landscapes. Black women’s labor underpinned the plantation economy and by extension the history of capitalism. These black women’s intellectual labor underpinned Caribbean radical politics. In both histories, it is their bodies that remain invisible. It is fitting, then, that here they are shown laboring, their physical comportment connecting them to a long history of female labor in the Caribbean; just as much, it is a symbol of their own intellectual labor.

The labor of these women and the histories they recall also reference the Caribbean as a site of consumption. The agricultural commodities the women harvest have sustained European and North American appetites. Now the Caribbean sustains them in other ways—through tourism, sex work, T-shirts, shoes, underwear. The invisible labor of black and brown women who work to produce these goods, and their overrepresentation in low-paid tourism work such as cleaning, continues to perpetuate this relationship of Western consumption and (unseen) Caribbean production.¹¹ Perhaps what is most confronting here is that we see how these histories of consumption inform and even structure the dynamics of contemporary Caribbean scholarship.

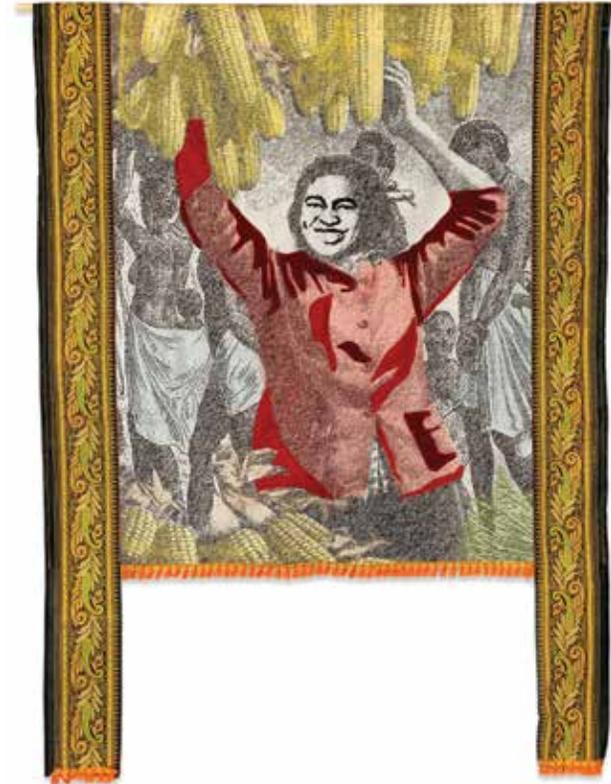


Figure 4. Patricia Kaersenhout, Claudia Jones panel from *Food for Thought*, 2018; photoprint on fabric, 42.125 x 59.0625 in.

Embedding these women in the landscape, Kaersenhout draws attention to their physical form. While the women’s poses are familiar, they also mark their strength. Claudia Jones is statuesque, her arms seeming to hold up the print itself as she reaches for the bright yellow corn cobs. She stands slightly at an angle, evoking those classicized figures of laboring peasants that populate nineteenth-century French and British paintings. In her red jacket—reminiscent of the Mao suit and symbolizing her communist politics—and with arms raised, Jones recalls victorious depictions of allegorical female figures.



Figure 5. Patricia Kaersenhout, Elma Van Francois panel from *Food for Thought*, 2018; photoprint on fabric, 44.09375 x 49.21875 in.

Like Jones's, the print depicting Elma van Francois, drawing on her biography—she was a cotton picker as a child—emphasizes her communist politics and her physical strength as features that transform her into a sculptured figure of power and vision.

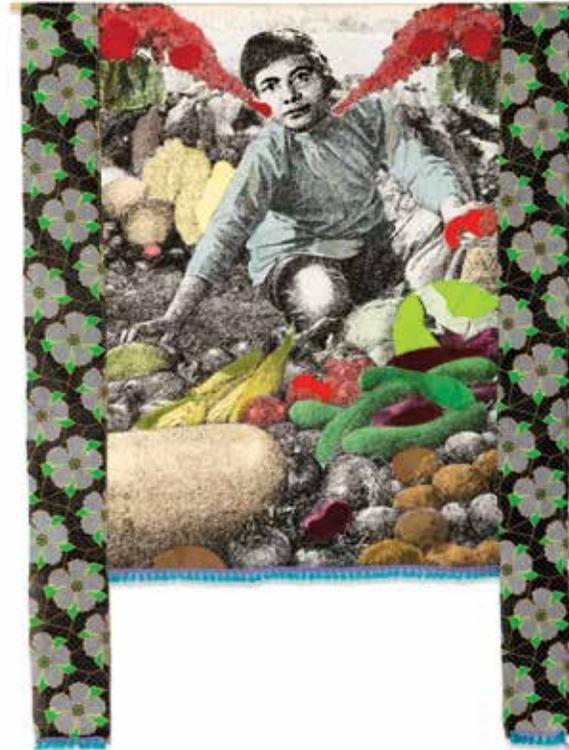


Figure 6. Patricia Kaersenhout, Paulette Nardal panel from *Food for Thought*; photoprint on fabric, 42.90625 x 60.2344 in.

Paulette Nardal is given a more intimate engagement with the landscape: surrounded by a cornucopia of delights, she seems to emerge from the land itself, giving her a dreamlike quality accentuated by two streams of red that flow from the sides of her face to the edges of the frame.

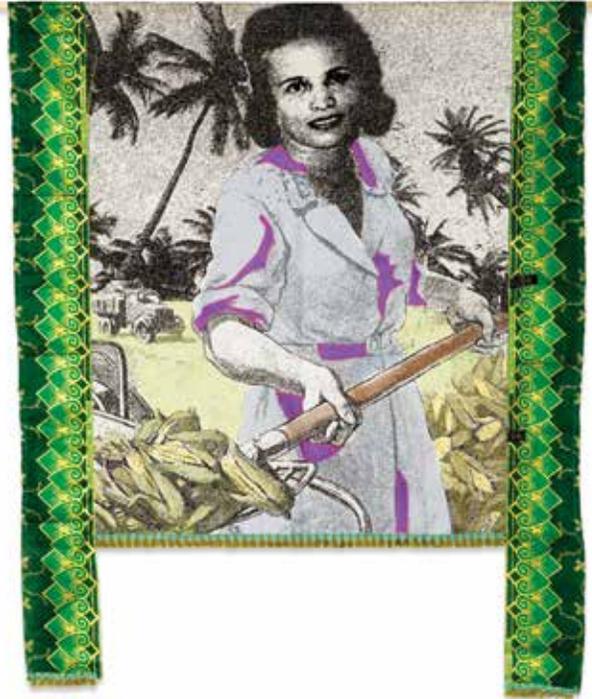


Figure 7. Patricia Kaersenhout, Suzanne Césaire panel from *Food for Thought*, 2018; photoprint on fabric, 42.5156 x 51.96875 in.



Figure 8. Patricia Kaersenhout, Gerty Archimedes, *Food for Thought*, 2018; photoprint on fabric, 43.3125 x 59.0625 in.

Both Suzanne Césaire and Gerty Archimedes are connected to the land through the machinery they use—a trowel for Césaire and a tractor for Archimedes. Césaire’s white and purple dress reflects the starlike fronds of the coconut trees behind her. She is as tall as the trees, her body—like the trowel she carries—projecting out toward the viewer. Archimedes perches on the large wheel of a tractor, surveying the scene. Shorter than the sugarcane behind her, she is nonetheless firmly grounded within the landscape around her.

While historically women’s bodies might have been embedded within plantation landscapes so as to naturalize their labor, here the land provides something like a firm footing. This is a reference to the way these women’s work has drawn, as Rhoda Reddick shows, from the very terrain of the Caribbean itself to challenge and reformat frameworks of antiracism, Pan-Africanism, and postcolonial discourse throughout the twentieth

century.¹² But this relationship also emphasizes their modernity, calling to mind the ways agricultural labor provided black women whose forms of mobility challenged the spatial logics of slavery itself.¹³ While historically the land became the site on which the labor of black women could be erased, here it becomes the site of the women’s emergence into the visual sphere. In the case of Jones, this is particularly haunting. Jones’s image is juxtaposed with ghostly figures of enslaved women, as if her memorialization emerges from the modernity of the women behind her. But their unclothed bodies remind us that this modernity was registered, cruelly, on the flesh.

Kaersenhout’s interest in the legacies of archival invisibility foreground the notion of the unthought: a form of forgetting that is also a refusal to acknowledge these legacies as horrors themselves.¹⁴ In their ghostlike form, these women, their classicized bodies reinforcing their visual elision into form, cannot, it seems, be fully formulated conceptually because the foundational moment—the brutality of plantation slavery—of their erasure remains elided in official historical archives. Being unthought is a kind of violence enacted

ontologically and epistemologically. This is reinforced by Kaersenhout's use of cotton fabric as the ground for the printed image. Cotton not only underpinned colonial expansion in the Caribbean, it framed the commodification of black enslaved bodies, as both currency and slave clothing. The historical equivalence of cotton and blackness is also suggestive, as if in this instance cotton might take the place of black flesh itself. Thus this history of commodification and of labor, underpinned by the lives of the enslaved, is here literally enacted on the works' material ground.

Returning to the ground, to the flesh—as a site of suffering—is nevertheless a way of rupturing these registers of denial, while also asserting other possibilities for envisioning the experience of black women.¹⁵ I am captivated by the colors Kaersenhout has infused in each of her prints. Not only do they literally highlight essential features of these women, they also disorientate our reading of the landscape. The colors defamiliarize these scenes, taking them out of the realm of the recognizable and into the realm of the imagined and the mythical. These prints are dreamlike, saturated in deep hues, created from a juxtaposition of disconnected forms and imbalances of scale that evoke the sensuality of artists such as Frieda Kahlo and the revolutionary aesthetic of muralists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros or even the mythopoetic landscapes of Aubrey Williams.¹⁶ We might read this as Kaersenhout's distillation of the radical imaginary of their subjects into visual form, which compel us to approach the archive, and its art histories, contrapuntally, as a site for speculation.¹⁷

Influenced by Communist posters from the mid-twentieth century, and interested in these women's involvement in anticapitalist movements, Kaersenhout disrupts these visual lineages further. With their technicolor hues, the images take on the appearance of film or public service posters, the women's bodies appearing almost larger than life. Here, then, Kaersenhout collages two vastly different sets of imagery: the visual language of elision, associated with Caribbean landscape imagery, and the visual language of hyperbole associated with propaganda. While formally they seem to function as the inverse of each other, Kaersenhout has grasped their similar ideological purpose as modes of communication that rely on emotional appeal through the repetition of specific motifs (the smiling worker/the domesticated slave, for example) and specific visual conventions (the scale of figure to ground or framing devices to focus lines of sight). Splicing these connections on the surface itself, Kaersenhout creates a new visual language, a new genealogy of visibility perhaps, from which she is able to commemorate these Afro-Caribbean women. Their commemoration, like historical portraiture, grounds them even as the women transcend the limits of particularity, the limits of their erasure.

Food for Thought is in close conversation with a long history of Caribbean intellectual thought—not least that of the women it honors—in which erasure is the ground from which the Caribbean is written back into histories of empire, postcolonialism, capitalism, and

the Americas.¹⁸ These forms of history writing are, according to David Scott, “reparatory,” in that they are histories of the present that center on “the perpetration of historical evils and injustices and the moral and material harms that these have spawned.” Reparatory history is, he continues, “a history of the fundamental claim that unrequited wrongs *remain wrongs still*, that they do not fade with the mere passage of time.”¹⁹ Directing us to see erasure as a form of vision itself, Kaersenhout foregrounds the translation work of images in making visible meanings about the Caribbean that rely on the invisibility of black and brown lives and their experiences. This she probes, like a wound, such that it becomes a space from which to see alternate histories and their futures. Her work begins from erasure because it is a space in which particular memories—flesh memories²⁰—can be located, and once located, they become the terrain that yields new critical paradigms and “emancipatory spaces.”²¹

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Dutch company Vlisco has been manufacturing these kinds of fabrics for West and Central African consumers since at least the nineteenth century. For more on this, see Suzanne Gott et al., *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2017); John Picton, *The Art of African Textiles* (London: Lund Humphries, 2000); and Silvia Ruschak, "The Gendered Luxury of Was Prints in South Ghana: A Local Luxury Good with Global Roots," in Karin Hofmeester and Bernd-Stefan Grewe, eds., *Luxury in Global Perspective: Objects and Practices, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 169–91.
- 2 See Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
- 3 For more on the possibilities and precarities of black flesh as a site of suffering, see Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737–80.
- 4 See Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–91; Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15–52; and Patricia Mohammed, *Imaging the Caribbean: Cultural and Visual Translation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 289–335.
- 5 These women were part of a heterogeneous collection of mid-twentieth-century intellectuals, artists, scholars, and workers spread across the Caribbean and Europe. Their writings and teaching sought to overturn the epistemological violence of the Caribbean's colonial past, while their anticolonialism also laid the groundwork for new constructions of Caribbean identity and movements for self-government. See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 52–68; and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 241–406.
- 6 Patricia Kaersenhout, interview with the author, 28 August 2018.
- 7 For more, see Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin, trans. Keith L. Walker (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012); Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996); Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*; Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018); and Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).2018
- 8 See, for example, Rhoda Reddock, *Elma François: The NWCSA and the Worker's Struggle for Change in the Caribbean* (London: New Beacon, 1988); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, "Erasures and the Practice of Diaspora Feminism," *Small Axe*, no. 17 (March 2005): 129–33; Michelle Stephens, "Disarticulating Black Internationalisms: West Indian Radicals and the Practice of Diaspora," *Small Axe*, no. 17 (March 2005): 100–111; Carole Boyce Davies, "Sisters Outside: Tracing the Caribbean/Black Radical Intellectual Tradition," *Small Axe*, no. 28 (March 2009): 217–29; Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; Claire Tancons, "Women in the Whirlwind: Withholding Guadeloupe's Archipelagic History," *Small Axe*, no. 39 (November 2012): 143–65; Rhoda Reddock, "Radical Caribbean Social Thought: Race, Class Identity, and the Postcolonial Nation," *Current Sociology* 62, no. 4 (2014): 493–511; Jennifer M. Wilks, "Revolutionary Genealogies: Suzanne Césaire's and Christiane Taubira's Writings of Dissent," *Small Axe*, no. 48 (November 2015): 91–101; Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); and Keisha Blain and Tiffany Gill, *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019).1988
- 9 I am thinking here, in particular, of Christina Sharpe's discussion of antiblack violence and its histories and legacies using meteorological terms and of David Scott's description of the "universality of claims of black people against the injustices that shaped their historical experience of enslaving and racially discriminatory powers." See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 25–68; and David Scott, "Preface: A Reparatory History of the Present," *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): viii. See also Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

- 10 Kaersenhout, interview.
- 11 See Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003); and Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean*.
- 12 See Rhoda Reddock, "Diversity, Difference, and Caribbean Feminism: The Challenge of Anti-racism," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, no. 1 (April 2007), sta.uwi.edu/crgs/april2007/journals/Diversity-Feb_2007.pdf; and Reddock, "Radical Caribbean Social Thought."
- 13 See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), 112–15.
- 14 As Saidiya Hartman has formulated, drawing on Hortense Spiller's theorization of captive flesh, black flesh figures as an inner register of violence against black diasporic subjects that has emerged from slavery but continues as slavery's afterlife. See Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201; and Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81. See also Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-slavery Subjects* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.
- 15 For more on the possibilities and precarities of black flesh as a site of suffering, see Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness."
- 16 For more on this, see Roshini Kempadoo, "Timings, Canon, and Art History," *Small Axe*, no. 47 (July 2015): 167–76.
- 17 See Krista A. Thompson, "'Call the Police. Call the Army. Call God. And Let's Have One Helluva Big Story': On Writing Caribbean Art Histories after Postcoloniality," *Small Axe*, no. 25 (February 2008): 169–81.
- 18 This scholarship centralizes the space of the Caribbean as a foundation on which Western modernity was built and a terrain from which these foundations are being dismantled. Not only have histories of the Caribbean challenged narrow definitions of colony/metropole, they are now uncovering the spatial logic and embodied practices of slavery and emancipation formulating new conceptions of mobility and circulation that reformat our understanding of the connections that exist between people across national and imperial boundaries. See, for example, C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd, eds., *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2000); Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Slavery and the Politics of Place: Representing the Colonial Caribbean, 1770–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Shalini Puri and Lara Putnam, *Caribbean Military Encounters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Reena N. Goldthree, "New Directions in Caribbean History," *American Historian*, no. 16 (May 2018); and Lillian Guerra, "Why Caribbean History Matters," *Perspectives on History*, 1 March 2014.1938
- 19 Scott, "Preface: A Reparatory History of the Present," x (italics in original).
- 20 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "Black Studies—Grammars of the Fugitive," Goldsmiths College, 6–7 December 2013, archive.org/details/Blackstudies-grammarsoffugitive; Roshini Kempadoo, "Spectres in the Postcolonies: Reimagining Violence and Resistance," in Celeste-Marie Bernier and Hannah Durkin, eds., *Visualizing Slavery: Art across the African Diaspora* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).
- 21 Annalee Davis, Joscelyn Gardner, Erica Moiah James, and Jerry Philogene, "Introduction: Art as Caribbean Feminist Practice," *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): 35.