

# 1 essays

*What and When  
was Caribbean Modernism?*

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# David Scott

## What and When was Caribbean Modernism?

### Preface

**DAVID SCOTT** teaches at Columbia University, New York, where he is the Ruth and William Lubic Professor in the Department of Anthropology. He is the author of seven books, *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil* (Minnesota, 1994), *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, 1999), *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke, 2004), *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Duke, 2014), and *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (Duke, 2017), *Irreparable Evil: An Essay in Moral and Reparatory History* (Columbia, 2024), and (with Orlando Patterson), *The Paradox of Freedom: A Biographical Dialogue* (Polity, 2023), and co-editor of *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors* (Stanford, 2007). He is currently at work on two book projects—the first is a biography of Stuart Hall; and the second is a reconsideration of question of reparation and revolution through the work of Walter Rodney. Scott is the founder and editor of the journal *Small Axe* ([www.smallaxe.net](http://www.smallaxe.net)), and director of the Small Axe Project. Over the past decade, he has directed a number of visual arts exhibition projects: *Caribbean Queer Visualities* (Outburst Queer Arts Festival, Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast [11 November 2016—7 January 2017]; and Transmission Gallery, Glasgow [18 February 2017—25 March 2017]); *The Visual Life of Social Affliction* (National Art Gallery, Nassau, The Bahamas [22 August 2019—10 November 2019]; Little Haiti Cultural Center Art Gallery [6 December 2019—28 February 2020]; and TENT, Rotterdam [10 July 2020—27 September 2020]), and *Pressure*, the Kingston Biennial 2022 (26 June—31 December 2022). The Small Axe Project is currently engaged in a series of interventions around the theme of Caribbean Modernism (see: [www.smallaxe.net/projects](http://www.smallaxe.net/projects)).

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What and when was Caribbean modernism? This is not an easy question to answer comprehensively, and I am not going to try. I am only going to venture a little way, provisionally, from a very specific Caribbean perspective and within the confines of a limited range of concerns. For after all, there is not likely one single answer that can provide a definitive story of the “what and when” of modernisms for that complex historical and geopolitical field that is the regional and diasporic Caribbean, with its diverse colonial histories and intellectual-artistic traditions. Not surprisingly, given these colonial histories, the story of Caribbean modernisms is often told—to the extent that it is told—as a story of the relationship between the rise of cultural nationalisms and political self-determination and the emergence of a spirit of experimentation and innovation in the literary and visual arts among a distinctively cosmopolitan and dissenting elite looking to find forms of expression by which to break out of the conformity and denigrations of the colonial order. I think this is right. And it is an important story. However, when and how this process unfolds in different contexts, through which figures, and in relation to what kinds of events is not self-evident. And therefore it is instructive to try to discern the structures of feeling, the cultural-political conjunctures, that brought modernism—as aesthetic-intellectual mood and style, as literary and artistic value, as social and individual ethos, as an attitude of dissent, as infrastructure and institution—into the forms of life of specific Caribbean artists and intellectuals. I believe historicizing Caribbean modernisms in this way is helpful for gaining some insight into what, at a given moment, they appeared to enable; and it will help us gauge the extent to which modernism remains a critical mode of cultural-intellectual reflection and creation.<sup>1</sup>

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Take Neville Dawes, for example, a Jamaican poet, novelist, essayist. Dawes was born in 1926, notably, in Warri, Nigeria, where his father, Augustus, was a teacher and missionary

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(part of a significant generation of West Indian missionaries in West Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Dawes grew up in Sturge Town, St. Ann, Jamaica, that early nineteenth-century postslavery settlement established by the Baptist missionary John Clark and named after the Quaker abolitionist and philanthropist Joseph Sturge, who had campaigned against the Apprenticeship system. In 1938, at the age of twelve, Dawes won a scholarship to the prestigious secondary school Jamaica College. Here, before long he began to think of himself as a poet, publishing poems in the school's yearbook. There would have been other, older boys in the school, who likewise thought of themselves as poets—M. G. Smith, for example, who was born in 1921 and graduated in 1939.<sup>2</sup> In those years, Jamaica College, which was modeled on the English public school, cultivated a sense of high and intense intellectual and artistic sensibility and personality among its ambitious students. Dawes was part of the second generation of twentieth-century Jamaican literary intellectuals. Roger Mais and Una Marson, for example, both born in 1905, belonged to the first. Unlike Mais and Marson, Dawes would have been too young to grasp the full significance of the social eruption of May and June 1938 as it unfolded, but he would have been among the first generation of inheritors of its social, cultural, and political effects—one dimension of which, I suggest, was the release of those intellectual and artistic *energies* that one might usefully call “modernism.”

In an autobiographical sketch (read on the BBC *Caribbean Voices* in 1957), Dawes offers some fascinating insight into one Jamaican adolescent's interpellation into a modernist sensibility. The scene—set in Kingston in 1942—seems straight out of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a Jamaican version of Leopold Bloom's peregrination through Dublin. Dawes writes:

When I was sixteen I walked the same route every night—up Elletson Road, along Banana Street, on Cumberland Avenue, up St. James's Road, then after an uncertain zig-zag through Vineyard Town, I walked down Merrion Road into South Camp

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Road: then I wandered all over Allman and Kingston Gardens and into North Street: then I turned seawards at Kingston College and made my first halt at the back of the Palace Cinema. I always left my house at eight o'clock so that when I reached the Palace the film was already in progress. Every night I listened to the disembodied American voices. If I jumped up I could see the large screen and the large celluloid heads blurred and out of focus. The music sounded fatuous and insincere without the distraction of the pictures; and in the arrogance of my adolescent intellectualism I was proud of not being able to afford to go to the cinema. After five minutes of contempt for a bastard art-form, I walked along Victoria Avenue and then again onto Elletson Road, home. I played jazz on the piano for an [sic] half-an-hour and finally shut myself away in my room reading Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot until late in the night.<sup>3</sup>

This is a self-portrait of the artist as a young man—friendless and self-absorbed, penniless and snobbish, living only to think and create—for whom the city as an urban landscape is less a social experience than a source of literary material, observed in a mobile, ironic, mildly indignant, and slightly abstract way. One evening Dawes runs into one of his teachers who extends an invitation to accompany him to a private soirée where Eliot's 1934 pageant play *The Rock* was to be read. Dawes is assured that “all the important writers, poets and painters would be there.”<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, the reading is unimpressive, even dull, but he is at least in the milieu of artists *being* artists, including an unnamed “nature” poet and “metaphysical” poet he knew from school, and someone called “Roger” (presumably Roger Mais).<sup>5</sup> The young Dawes drinks and smokes and then abruptly leaves with de rigueur gloom and dejection to return to his soliloquies and peregrinations.

Or take Stuart Hall, who was likewise *seized* by modernism in exactly this moment in 1940s colonial Kingston. Born in 1932, Hall too attended Jamaica College, where he also, before

long, began to think of himself as a poet. He too published a number of poems in the school yearbook. Indeed, Hall remembers Dawes as a senior boy whom he admired, not only as a poet but more especially as a jazz pianist (as he himself later became).<sup>6</sup> The unlikely scene of Hall's encounter with modernism was the Institute of Jamaica (of which, interestingly, Dawes became the director in later years). “I well remember, as an aspiring young poet in the Romantic mode,” Hall writes, “my first encounter with the recognizably contemporary, vernacular, conversational language and rhythms of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Magic!” He goes on: “Every line in this poetry seemed willfully constructed in a radically unhomey idiom. Nevertheless, it opened doors into sensibilities about which I knew nothing. Perversely, perhaps, I wanted to know more, even while—or because—I felt shut out.”<sup>7</sup> The sense of novelty and compulsion is palpable. A bit later, speaking of his encounter with Joyce's *Ulysses*, Hall writes, in a more measured and self-questioning way:

Encountering these ideas in the steaming midday heat of a tropical colonial city was like experiencing a snowstorm in a Caribbean summer. With what form of life did these strange, unconventional things connect? What circumstances had produced them? Was the way Joyce experimented with language linked to the fact that he was Irish? Or were cosmopolitanism and Irishness mutually exclusive? And if so, why was *Ulysses* being written in Trieste? Could you compose “modern poetry” or paint an abstract work of art or write *Ulysses* in Kingston, and what would that mean?<sup>8</sup>

And yet, Hall realized, modernism was one of the resources that enabled him to navigate the strictures and conformities of the colonial order and to begin to assemble, as he puts it, *another* life.

In a sense Dawes and Hall are haunted by the same entangled aspiration and doubt about the possibility and impossibility of the colonial subject's essentially *paradoxical* relation to

modernism. As Hall voices it: “Wasn’t it a contradiction in terms to be a modernist in Jamaica?”<sup>9</sup> The answer for both Hall and Dawes was yes *and* no—it *was* and *was not* a contradiction. Or to put it differently, Hall and Dawes recognized that modernism was not simply an option they could evade (as the internalized dispositions of embodied sensibility and taste), even if it was also not an option they could straightforwardly, politically, embrace (as a hegemonic mode of aesthetic judgment concerning, for example, the absolute autonomy of the work of art or the secluded detachment and ironic noncommitment of the artist). As would be the case for other Caribbean poet-intellectuals of this generation (Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott, for example), for Hall and Dawes modernism was installed in the colonial sensorium as, at once, a desire and a challenge.<sup>10</sup>

Now, it is worth remembering that in the late 1930s and 1940s Kingston was the scene of a tremendous cultural-political ferment to which Dawes and Hall were responding, trying, as young poet-intellectuals (scarcely more than coming-of-age adolescents), to digest the ruptures and opportunities of the emerging conjuncture: on the one hand, the disintegration of the privilege of the old colonial practices of politics and the Victorian and Edwardian forms of the arts and, on the other, the emergence of new spaces and infrastructures and vocabularies that seemed to offer hither unimagined possibilities of subjectivity and creative expression. In the sphere of politics, of course, the incipient anticolonial demand for self-determination was rapidly taking formal shape, and one outcome of the working-class unrest of May–June 1938 was the formation of the Peoples National Party, whose express project was to make constitutional headway toward self-government. It was the birth of a new idea of political organization and democratic politics. But there was also the palpable emergence of a broader public sphere shaped by visual, literary, and intellectual modernisms, stimulating a picture of a new and modern Jamaica. As is well known, in the visual arts it is the sculptural work of Edna Manley (born in 1900) in the 1920s and 1930s that sets in motion the development of a Jamaican school of modernism, of which the most iconic work

is her *Negro Aroused* (1935). But more than this, Manley inspired and organized around her a group of artists, sometimes referred to as the Institute Group, which included people like David Pottinger, Albert Huie, and Ralph Campbell. In literature, a number of writers were experimenting with voice and form. Think of the fiction of Roger Mais and Vic Reid, the poetry and plays of Una Marson, and the poetry of George Campbell and M. G. Smith and Louise Bennett. And in intellectual discourse, *Public Opinion*, founded in 1937 and first edited by the writer and journalist Frank Hill, provided a platform for the development of a politically informed criticism aimed at encouraging and cultivating a spirit of dissent and creative autonomy. Jamaicans were being challenged by new and nonconformist images of themselves, their pasts, and their prospects and being urged to discard the centuries-old colonial ideology of inferiority and dependence.

This was part of the cultural-political context in which the anxieties and aspirations embodied in the remarks on modernism by Dawes and Hall should be located. It offers one way of orienting ourselves to the “what and when” of Caribbean modernism. It is not the whole picture, of course, and it is from only one specific moment and one specific neighborhood in the larger Caribbean.

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Between 9 and 11 November 2023, the Small Axe Project, in association with Wereldmuseum and the gallery Framer Framed, organized a symposium in Amsterdam called “What and When Was Caribbean Modernism?” The aim was to think this question geopolitically across the regional and diasporic Caribbean (hispanophone, francophone, anglophone, and Dutch) and to encompass both the literary and visual arts. We had no illusion of comprehensiveness, let alone definitiveness. The symposium was really meant to be entirely exploratory. We aimed to do no more than think out loud and listen to each other address the provocations that were embodied in the invitation. There we acknowledged that across a range of

artistic and intellectual expressions and identities, modernism had been a shaping force in the twentieth-century Caribbean:

If European high modernism was partly nourished on imperial conceptions of itself as different from the “primitive other,” the vernacular modernisms of the colonial world were compelled to forge self-authored modernisms by appropriating, indigenizing, creolizing, transforming and translating the forms and languages of modernism within and in opposition to the authoritative narrative of “the west.” Founded as it was, as a geopolitical region, within modern structures of power—colonial slavery and indenture—the problem of modernity is native to the Caribbean. Not surprisingly, therefore, across the regional and diasporic Caribbean modernisms contributed to the modes of radical artistic and intellectual response to colonial domination, dispossession, and oppression, providing some of the idioms, styles and infrastructures through which the politics, poetics and aesthetics of self-determination were articulated. These poetic and aesthetic forms might themselves lead us to consider whether thinking in terms of “vernacular modernisms” tether their creators, who did not simply receive modernism, but also co-created it, to the “periphery.” In the last three decades or so, moreover, with the waning of postcolonial sovereignty and the rise of globalization, there is reason to doubt that modernism continues to be the subversive force that it was for so long taken to be. And if this is so, how should we characterize the forces that shape contemporary Caribbean visual, literary, and intellectual discourse about injustice and the struggles against it.<sup>11</sup>

In formulating the provocation in this way, my intuition was that the grip of modernism, in certain perhaps fundamental ways, is loosening in the contemporary Caribbean and that we are witnessing the emergence of new aesthetic and cultural-political languages, styles, and infrastructure, as well as new global modalities of artistic and intellectual production and

circulation. As I might have anticipated, scarcely anyone exactly agreed. And in the end—as the essays that follow make clear—it would be hard to say that we landed on any firm ground. There was more *disagreement* than not. But the very nature of the disagreement suggested that there was, indeed, something worth arguing about. Thus, there was a second iteration of our project, “Dialogues in Caribbean Modernisms,” which took place in San Juan, Puerto Rico, between 24 and 26 October 2024.<sup>12</sup>

It only remains for me to offer the requisite thanks and gratitude. To begin with, I want to thank the Small Axe Caribbean Modernism group: Jerry Philogene, Erica Moiah James, Wayne Modest, and Vanessa Pérez-Rosario. Without their imagination and inspiration nothing could have been accomplished. I thank too Josien Pieterse and her colleagues at Framed for agreeing to host this conversation. I am grateful, too, to Wayne Modest, in his capacity as director of content at Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam, for seeing merit in the project and agreeing to share it with the Small Axe Project. In this context, I thank also Esmee Schoutens and Olombi Bois, Wayne’s colleagues at Wereldmuseum, for their tireless work in bringing together the symposium. I thank Dantaé Elliott, one of the editorial assistants at *Small Axe*, for all the work she put into this event. Needless to say, I would like to offer a very big thank you to the Mellon Foundation for their funding support. In particular I thank Deborah Cullen for keeping faith in us. Finally, as with much else in the Small Axe Project, little could be accomplished without Juliet Ali’s graphic sensibility, her capacity to translate my vague ideas about design into the visible and tangible aesthetic forms that the various materializations of the Small Axe Project take. If we have a visual identity, it is one she has given us. And I am also grateful to Sven Johnson for building the web platform on which these essays now live.



## Endnotes

- 1 See Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).
- 2 On Smith, see Douglas Hall, *A Man Divided: Michael Garfield Smith, Jamaican Poet and Anthropologist, 1921–1993* (Kingston: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1997).
- 3 Neville Dawes, “Preliminary Sketch for an Autobiography,” in *Fugue, and Other Writings* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2012), 127.
- 4 Dawes, “Preliminary Sketch for an Autobiography,” 131.
- 5 Dawes, “Preliminary Sketch for an Autobiography,” 132.
- 6 Stuart Hall, with Bill Schwarz, *Familiar Stranger: A Life between Two Islands* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 112.
- 7 Hall, *Familiar Stranger*, 120–21.
- 8 Hall, *Familiar Stranger*, 124.
- 9 Hall, *Familiar Stranger*, 124.
- 10 See Charles Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).
- 11 From the symposium invitation shared with participants. Not publicly available.
- 12 See [smallaxe.net/sxprojects/modernisms](http://smallaxe.net/sxprojects/modernisms).

# Wigbertson Julian Isenia

Language, Identity, and  
Transgender Narratives  
in Dutch Caribbean  
Modernism

**WIGBERTSON JULIAN ISENIA** is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, focusing on gender, sexuality, and postcolonial contexts, particularly in the Dutch Caribbean. He has published in journals such as *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* (Dutch Journal for Gender Studies), *Feminist Review*, and *Small Axe*, and contributed to the *Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*. His monograph, *The Question of Dutch Politics as a Matter of Theater*, was published in 2017. His article “Looking for Kambrada: Sexuality and Social Anxieties in the Dutch Colonial Archive, 1882–1923” received an honorable mention for the Gregory Sprague Prize from the Committee on LGBT History. His dissertation, “Queer Sovereignities: Cultural Practices of Sexual Citizenship in the Dutch Caribbean,” also received an honorable mention from the Caribbean Studies Association. Beyond academia, he co-curated the exhibitions “Nos tei” about queer of color organizing and “House of HIV: The Stories Behind 40 Years of Community Initiatives.”

Caribbean literature offers a rich exploration of identity, history, and language, with Caribbean modernism embodying the region's quest for self-definition in the aftermath of colonial rule. This essay investigates the contributions of the Curaçaoan writer Frank Martinus Arion to Caribbean modernism, focusing on his integration of language, culture, and transgender narratives in the Dutch Caribbean context. Arion's works, particularly his novel *De laatste vrijheid* (The last freedom, 1995), exemplify his commitment to challenging colonial legacies and reshaping postcolonial identities through his distinctive storytelling.

The guiding questions for this analysis are as follows: How do Arion's contributions to Caribbean modernism, through his exploration of linguistic legacy, societal upheaval, and the symbolic ascent in postcolonial consciousness, interplay to shape a distinct Caribbean cultural and artistic identity, particularly in the context of the Dutch Caribbean's historical and societal challenges? How did the 30 May 1969 uprising in Curaçao catalyze significant cultural, linguistic, and political transformations in the Dutch Caribbean, and how are these changes reflected in the narratives and character developments in *De laatste vrijheid*? Additionally, how does Arion's representation of a volcano as a trans\* entity in the novel serve as a metaphor for the transformative and disruptive forces in postcolonial Caribbean societies, particularly in challenging and reshaping traditional narratives and identities related to gender and modernity? This essay examines Arion's engagement with these themes, examining the role of language as a conduit for cultural continuity and a reflection of existing tensions within a postcolonial framework. It explores Arion's depiction of transgender identities, setting them within the broader search for postcolonial identity and the articulation of a distinct regional voice that challenges the legacies of colonial suppression.

The structure of this essay is as follows: First, I discuss Arion's linguistic contributions and his impact on shaping postcolonial identities. I then analyze his literary portrayal of a transgender character, contextualizing this depiction within the region's modernist narrative.

Finally, I synthesize these insights to assess the broader implications of Arion's work for our understanding of the temporal and thematic scopes of Caribbean modernism. This analysis aims to demonstrate how Arion's oeuvre contributes to and enriches our understanding of Caribbean modernism by integrating transgender narratives and linguistic evolution.

Arion's work on Creole linguistics, tracing its origins and ties to Caribbean modernism, underscores the role of language in articulating resistance and identity. This essay argues that Arion's literary contributions embody the essence of Caribbean modernism and provide profound insights into the relationship between language, identity, and transgender narratives. Through his advocacy for linguistic legitimacy and his character portrayals, Arion's work serves as a pivotal platform for redefining postcolonial identity in the Dutch Caribbean.

#### **Act I:**

##### **Linguistic Legacy and Caribbean Modernism**

The 1992 television episode "De geest van de vrijheid: Frank Martinus Arion" (The spirit of freedom: Frank Martinus Arion) features a powerful scene with Arion ascending Curaçao's Sint-Christoffelberg, the island's highest peak at 372 meters. This hill, named after Saint Christopher, is the third-highest in the predominantly flat terrain of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. At the summit, viewers are treated to a panoramic view of the island, including the distant Tafelberg (Table Mountain), reminiscent of a similarly named mountain in another former Dutch colony in South Africa. In this pivotal moment, Arion stands with his back to the camera, a deliberate choice that creates a striking and enigmatic image (see figs. 1 and 2). As he reaches the peak, he raises his arms and proclaims, "Yokang a pari guene" (The Indigenous woman bore a Negro), a phrase he emphatically repeats. The dramatic breakthrough of sunlight piercing the clouds casts an ethereal glow around him, enhancing the scene's mystical aura.



Figure 1. Wigbertson Julian Isenia, *Frank Martinus Arion Ascending Sint-Cristoffelberg: Embracing Freedom at the Summit*, 2024, digital drawing using a graphics tablet, based on a scene from the 1992 TV episode “De Geest van de Vrijheid: Frank Martinus Arion,” directed by Sherman de Jesus, 48.73 × 48.72 cm (19.18 × 19.18 in.)

The episode employs a dynamic range of visual techniques to enhance the cinematic quality of this sequence. The montage includes a distant shot of Arion’s solitary figure against the expansive landscape, a low-angle view emphasizing his imposing stature, and a close-up that deepens the emotional impact of the scene. The movement of his clothing in the wind



Figure 2. Wigbertson Julian Isenia, *Frank Martinus Arion’s Proclamation: “Yokang a pari guene” at the Peak of Sint-Cristoffelberg*, 2024, digital drawing using a graphics tablet, based on a scene from the 1992 TV episode “De Geest van de Vrijheid: Frank Martinus Arion,” directed by Sherman de Jesus, 47.96 × 48.72 cm (18.88 × 19.18 in.)

adds a dynamic element to the visuals, which are accompanied by John Corigliano’s Symphony no. 1: I—Apologue: Of Rage and Remembrance, whose stirring melodies augment the tension and drama.

Arion, a distinguished poet, novelist, linguist with a PhD, language advocate, and former director of the Antillean Linguistic Institute in Curaçao, is introduced in this scene. His life (1936–2015) and legacy are captured in this 1992 production by the National Dutch Broadcasting Corporation. This profile is part of a triptych in the Sound & Vision archives, which includes two other Curaçaoan male writers: Boeli van Leeuwen and Tip Marugg.

The phrase Arion declaims in this opening scene, “Yokang a pari guene,” is from the Guene language. Guene, a language devised by enslaved people, survived as a medium of covert communication into the twentieth century but is no longer widely spoken today.<sup>1</sup> Arion’s scholarly work on Guene assessed its impact on the development of Papiamentu, a creole language that blends Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and Taino elements and is spoken by most of the population on Curaçao and Bonaire.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many Creole languages, which have not been formally integrated into educational systems in the regions where they are spoken, Papiamentu is an official language of instruction and initial literacy in the public school system. Additionally, it serves as the official language of government in Bonaire and Curaçao, as Papiamentu does in Aruba.<sup>3</sup> Guene’s cryptic nature enabled enslaved people to discreetly share their experiences. Anecdotal evidence from a person born in 1905 suggests that workers in phosphate mines would sing in Guene to obscure the true meanings of their songs from overseers.<sup>4</sup> Rose Mary Allen interprets this secretive use of Guene as a form of resistance, reflecting the nuanced ways the oppressed negotiate and defy power dynamics.<sup>5</sup> The expression “Yokang a pari guene” encapsulates a commitment to linguistic evolution intertwined with the island’s historical narrative, highlighting language development as a tool for critiquing colonial history and achieving liberation. This phrase acknowledges the tragic displacement and genocide of the Indigenous populations, followed by the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, which uprooted African communities. It also carries personal ancestral meaning for Arion, linking Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean heritages. In discussing this, it is imperative to recognize the phrase’s significance in the development

and relevance of creole languages, particularly as it addresses the historical erasure of Indigenous languages and cultures in the Caribbean, especially in the Dutch Caribbean island territories. Historians account for Indigenous people of the Americas in the history books of the Dutch Caribbean islands in brief descriptions, focusing mainly on the purportedly complete genocide of the Indigenous people. As a result, the Indigenous culture remains, as Stuart Hall puts it, a ghostly presence, “part of the barely knowable or usable past.”<sup>6</sup>

Arion’s ascent of Sint-Christoffelberg in the episode is symbolic, possibly suggesting that his physical climb mirrors the ascension of postcolonial consciousness. This essay aims to clarify the essence of Caribbean modernism, primarily addressing the “what” and, to a lesser extent, the “when” of this movement. Emerging in the early twentieth century, Caribbean literary modernism was propelled by a group of writers who blended African American cultural elements, European avant-garde, and Indigenous Caribbean traditions. This movement eschews simple imitation of established forms, opting instead for genuine and innovative expressions of artistic identity.<sup>7</sup> This approach transcends mere mimicry of diverse influences; instead, it represents a dynamic process of creative revision and renewal. At the heart of Caribbean modernism is its deliberate focus on the themes of race, identity, and cultural heritage, underscoring its vital role in shaping the broader discourse on modernity. Capturing scholars’ varied perspectives in a singular, unified definition of Caribbean modernism is an unattainable goal. The concept is akin to the multidimensional nature of a church, which serves a spectrum of purposes for its attendees. Some are attracted by the solemnity of prayer, while others are drawn by the sense of community and shared cultural experiences, such as communal meals. Some seek meaningful connections that elevate their everyday lives, while others enjoy the passive experience of simply being part of the congregation, just happy to come along and participate without deeper engagement.

Interpretations of Caribbean modernism are notably diverse: some scholars view it as a platform for critical reflection and intellectual discourse, while others view it as an arena for exploring and appreciating cultural expressions. Some seek in it a sense of identity or community, while others participate more passively. This range of engagement and interpretation highlights the complexity and multidimensional nature of Caribbean modernism as both a literary and cultural movement. To me, Caribbean modernism signifies a profound engagement with the region's unique cultural history, spotlighting the narratives and experiences of marginalized communities. This movement is characterized by bold experimentation in form, language, and genre, incorporating elements such as free verse, surrealism, and Indigenous folk traditions. It is deeply entrenched in the sociopolitical context of art and literature, often addressing themes such as colonialism, racial injustice, and labor exploitation. Open to global influences, particularly from Europe and the United States, Caribbean modernism also incorporates perspectives from across the Caribbean and Latin America. Ultimately, it is committed to developing a distinctive Caribbean cultural and artistic identity that critically reflects and addresses the region's complex sociopolitical landscape.

The relationship between modernism and modernity clarifies the temporal aspect of modernism, or the "when." David Scott argues that colonial impositions of modernity interrupted the natural evolution of cultural identities, transforming the advent of modernity into a period of disruption rather than continuous progression.<sup>8</sup> This disruption compelled postcolonial societies to reconstruct their identities under drastically altered conditions. Caribbean modernism is deeply entrenched in this colonial legacy, manifesting as a conscious engagement with history and a proactive journey toward the future. Scott champions a critical perspective on modernity from a postcolonial viewpoint, advocating that these societies be seen as active architects of their destiny rather than passive victims of an imposed modernity.

Building on this conceptual framework, Caribbean modernism has profoundly influenced the formation of a distinct regional and diasporic identity, presenting innovative methods for contesting colonial power and oppression. This movement has created a platform through which Caribbean individuals can articulate their political opinions, artistic expressions, and philosophical principles of self-governance. Although Arion's oeuvre is not typically classified within Caribbean modernism, applying this analytical framework to his work offers valuable insights into the themes of cultural resilience and the pursuit of autonomy in Caribbean literature.

Arion's novel *De laatste vrijheid* is set on the fictional Caribbean island of Amber (see fig. 3). The narrative begins with part 1, "Het Verkoolde Bos" (The charred forest). Based on new data and past volcanic activity, Brouce, a volcano watcher, initiates an evacuation of Constance, the island's capital. In part 2, "Guerrillas of Love," US journalist Joan arrives to report on the evacuation. She travels to Constance and meets Daryll, the protagonist, who has decided to remain behind. Accompanied by Daryll and his children, Joan climbs the volcano. During their ascent, Daryll tells Joan about his past: originally from Curaçao, he resisted Dutch influences, choosing to educate his children in Papiamentu rather than the colonial Dutch language. His wife, Adeline, seeking a music career, moved to the Netherlands, resulting in their separation, although she continued to provide financial support for their children. Daryll relocated to Amber, attracted by its history. Amber shares historical parallels with Haiti, notably due to a rebellion in 1795 when enslaved and recently freed people clashed with white French, Dutch, and English enslavers, resulting in a victory for the enslaved people. Unlike many other Caribbean nations, "Amber een van de weinige landen in het Caribisch gebied waar de slavernij afgeschaft is zonder dat de slaveneigenaren vergoeding voor hun slaven hebben gekregen."<sup>9</sup>





Figure 3. Wigbertson Julian Isenia, *Volcanic Eruption*, 2024, digital drawing using a graphics tablet, based on Frank Martinus Arion, *De laatste vrijheid* book cover, 158.08 × 211.67 cm (62.24 × 83.33 in.)

Despite the challenges of separating and not raising her children, Adeline dedicates herself to composing symphonies that draw on her experiences and explore themes such as sexual freedom and musical independence. In part 3, “Het ei van Dogons” (The egg of the Dogons), Joan’s relationship with Daryll deepens as she admires his family’s steadfast resilience. Overcoming her initial apprehension, Joan spends a night with Daryll, significantly strengthening their bond. In part 4, “De laatste vrijheid” (The last freedom), Joan interviews Daryll alongside four volcanic experts. During the interview, Daryll delivers a compelling speech about the choices Constance’s residents face: they either remain in restrictive refugee camps or live freely in the city under the threat of volcanic eruption. Witnessing the interview, Adeline rushes to Constance to rescue their children as the evacuation camps empty as residents choose to return home. Subsequently, the volcanic experts visit the crater with Daryll, leaving Joan to care for Daryll’s children.

The volcano erupts during the visit, killing three experts and severely injuring Daryll, who narrowly escapes with one surviving researcher. When Adeline learns that her children are safe and that the airport has been damaged, she decides to stay in the Netherlands. The dead experts are commemorated as heroes. The volcano is deemed no longer dangerous, and the evacuation order is soon revoked. On 1 September, the Creole language is officially adopted as the language of instruction in all of Amber’s schools.

This transformation of Amber from crisis to renewal echoes in the cultural sphere as well. Arion started the magazine *Ruku* in 1969. In an early issue, Cola Debrot, then the governor of the Netherlands Antilles, published a quatrain—a four-line poem—that reflected on the island’s melancholic state: “Droevig eiland, droevig volk.”<sup>10</sup> Building on the theme of desolation expressed in Debrot’s quatrain, Arion later wrote *De laatste vrijheid*, symbolically reversing the “sad island” narrative by showcasing a transformation from despair to hope.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout *De laatste vrijheid*, themes such as the tension between progress and tradition,

societal struggles, and human vulnerability are intertwined. The novel mirrors the principles of Caribbean modernism through its layered depiction of the personal and societal transformation on Amber. The narrative deftly explores the region's postcolonial quest for identity—a cornerstone of Caribbean modernism.<sup>12</sup> It aligns with Arion's dedication to preserving Caribbean linguistic heritage, culminating in the symbolic adoption of Creole as Amber's official language. This act of cultural affirmation and resilience is emblematic of the themes central to Caribbean modernist thought.

*De laatste vrijheid* does not comfortably align with the conventional timeline of Caribbean modernism, which is typically defined by scholars as beginning in the early twentieth century and extending through the Second World War and subsequent decolonization movements.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the style of Caribbean modernism is contested, as Arion's approach is notably traditional. Ronald Severing observes that Arion consistently utilizes classical structures in his writing. For instance, *De laatste vrijheid* is built around a biblical archetype, with Daryll cast as a Christ-like figure in the idyllic setting of Amber, accompanied by his disciples Sigui and Mau.<sup>14</sup> From the slopes of a volcano, he delivers a sermon reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount, which is broadcast globally on the CIN network, stirring the masses. Ultimately, he survives a volcanic eruption and emerges from a cave, mirroring Christ's resurrection.

Arion's penchant for crafting narratives around familiar classical motifs is apparent throughout his work, assuming the reader's familiarity with these archetypal stories. Although one does not need this background to understand the basic plot, possessing it deepens the reading experience by adding layers of meaning, as Severing points out.<sup>15</sup> Severing also identifies a constellation of recurrent themes in Arion's oeuvre: a critical view of European and other dominant influences, characterized by a rejection of all forms of neocolonialism; a focus on racial tensions; a challenge to established hierarchies; and a keen engagement with Indigenous languages.<sup>16</sup> These consistent elements anchor Arion in the Caribbean

modernist tradition, reflecting its opposition to colonial legacies and its celebration of cultural uniqueness.

Arion explicitly counters Debrot's portrayal of a "sad island, sad people" by quoting and critiquing V. S. Naipaul. Part 2 of Arion's novel, named after Naipaul's book *Guerrillas*, critiques Naipaul's infamous assertion that the history of the Caribbean cannot be satisfactorily told and that "nothing was created in the West Indies."<sup>17</sup> Naipaul's influence is also evident in Aideline's and Daryll's travels through Caribbean countries and their perspectives on them. For example, "Alles wat kon bijdragen om Naipauls negatieve visie op het Caribisch gebied te ontzenuwen, was welkom in Grenada," and Aideline's music opposes Naipaul's books, which depict the Caribbean as an utterly hopeless corner of the world.<sup>18</sup> Arion engages in a linguistic experiment typical of Caribbean modernism—an effort to articulate a postcolonial self in contrast, and in relation, to the former colonial powers and their portrayal of the region. Arion does this within a trans-Caribbean framework, connecting with other Caribbean thinkers such as Derek Walcott.

Indeed, as Doris Hambuch points out, Arion extensively quotes Walcott's *Omeros* in the final part of *De laatste vrijheid*, which unfolds during and after the volcanic eruption. Having read *Omeros* and been inspired by Daryll's plea for Caribbean citizens to return home, Aideline revises her musical composition, *Guerrillas of Love*. It becomes the concluding part of a more extended concert, now renamed *Thuiskomst van de guerilla* (Homecoming of the guerrilla). Aideline reflects on the contrast between Naipaul and Walcott while contemplating Walcott's writings. She notes on Walcott's writing, "Al zijn boeken waren vol van *sunrise*."<sup>19</sup> She realizes on the plane that if Naipaul's idea—that the tropics were sad, unproductive, and imitative—held any truth, it was because Naipaul himself was one of the biggest imitators of Europeans, who typically saw only the sunset in the tropics. Unlike Naipaul, who refused to identify with the Caribbean and instead saw himself as a visitor, Walcott consistently



emphasized his Caribbean identity. As Aideline observes, Walcott's perspective celebrates the region's inherent vitality and potential: "Europeanen zien in de tropen voornamelijk de zonsondergang. . . . Ze konden zich gemakkelijk een tropische zonsondergang inbeelden, Omdat *onder* gemakkelijk met *droevig* geassocieerd kan worden. Maar een *zonsopkomst!* Een tropische zonsopkomst is niet in te beelden, niet te beschrijven en niet na te beelden. . . . [Walcott] ging uit van het Caribische gebied."<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, Arion never wrote his novels in Papiamentu. In an interview, he explained that while Papiamentu is crucial for the development of Curaçaoan literature, more significant and better-known novels are written in Dutch.<sup>21</sup> He discusses how Pierre Lauffer initiated a movement around 1940, exploring the potential of Papiamentu as a poetic and literary language. Lauffer, renowned for his rhythmic and symbolic use of Papiamentu, experimented in his writing by combining social concerns with personal melancholy.<sup>22</sup> However, these early writers worked during an era dominated by Dutch colonial influence, when Dutch was the only language of instruction in schools. This significantly shaped the literary landscape for subsequent generations. As Arion states in the interview,

And I do think that that has to do with the fact that the reading culture is in another language; writing has to do with reading, and you have to read novels to write them. It's not possible to invent the wheel again. Your extensive writing (particularly in prose) at schools is mostly in Dutch, but in Papiamentu you have the songs, the traditional songs, and those things in Papiamentu make poetry easier to write in Papiamentu. So for a long time, I was (while writing poetry in Dutch) looking for rhythms and expressions that were Papiamentu, and I only discovered, very late, that I was trying to write Papiamentu using Dutch, you know? And that's why my poetry is a kind of experiment in Dutch: I'm really looking for Papiamentu.<sup>23</sup>

This linguistic experimentation in Arion's work reflects the hybrid nature of Caribbean identity and contributes significantly to the dialogue on Caribbean modernism. The fusion of Euro-

pean and Creole languages creates a unique literary voice. The legacy of the colonial Dutch language, deeply embedded in schoolbooks and formal education, enables this experimentation. This foundation provides a platform from which to challenge and innovate, fostering a distinctive Caribbean literary expression.

*De laatste vrijheid* can be contextualized within both modern and postmodern literary frameworks. The narrative's modernist elements are evident, as it explores the quest for individual autonomy, a central theme in modern literature, set against the backdrop of societal shifts. Modern life poses significant challenges to individual autonomy in the face of powerful social forces, historical legacies, and external cultural influences.<sup>24</sup> Set on a Caribbean island beset by an impending volcanic eruption and cultural conflicts, the novel provides the setting for exploring personal and collective experiences in transformative times. Arion's contributions, deeply embedded in the broader canvas of his era, resonate subtly with the undefined contours of sociopolitical shifts, suggesting a nuanced reflection on the role of literature in the gradual molding of a collective ethos.

Alongside its modernist attributes, the novel also exhibits postmodern characteristics, notably through its critique of dominant narratives and the unmet promises of postcolonial independence. As the book laments, "De onafhankelijkheid van Suriname werd niet de droom die het had. Het ging meer en meer in de richting van de nachtmerrie!" or "Ze had bovendien zo haar reserves tegenover onafhankelijkheid. Het werd steeds aangekondigd als een gift voor heel het volk, maar in werkelijkheid scheen het een gift voor slechts een kleine groep te zijn. Degene die in de plaats traden van de expatriates."<sup>25</sup> Or as it mocks the postcolonial status of the Dutch Caribbean islands: "We hebben een hele speciale manier om onze afhankelijkheid te vieren. Waar andere staten hun onafhankelijkheidsdag herdenken, vieren wij gewoon een willekeurige dag. Elk eiland heeft er een, zodat niemand de ander iets

hoeft te benijden. We schrijven een prijsvraag uit voor een dag, een volkslied en een vlag. In het lied moet vooral gode dank gebracht worden dat we van dat eiland zijn en niet van een ander. En de zaak is klaar.”<sup>26</sup>

The volcanic eruption both symbolizes a cultural shift and is a literal natural phenomenon that hinders the shift. It is perceived as an opportunity, and sometimes an island is seen as lacking such a genuine eruption. For example, Daryll states, “Ik ben blij dat op 1 september op Amber het creool wordt ingevoerd. Dat is belangrijker dan de uitbarsting van de vulkaan. Dat is pas een *uitbarsting!* Hier begon mijn leven op opnieuw.”<sup>27</sup> In a critique of Curaçao, he remarks that “Curaçao is stil blijven staan. Curaçao is echt een dode vulkaan. Hier [op Amber] is het leven in beweging: het barst uit zou je kunnen zeggen. Het gaat ergens naartoe.”<sup>28</sup> Volcanic eruptions represent both danger and potential.

Arion incisively examines issues of ethnic, racial, and gender identity, challenging entrenched power structures. The characters’ lives illustrate these challenges: Daryll, a nurturing father who challenges traditional gender roles, and Aideline, who prioritizes her career over conventional maternal responsibilities. The choice to remain on or leave the island of Amber extends beyond personal consequences, representing a significant political statement. Aideline’s decision to depart for Europe and leave her children behind highlights the fusion of personal and political factors, a key feature of postmodern thought.

## Act II: From Turmoil to Transformation: Eruption and Release

Having delineated the linguistic and cultural pillars of Arion’s contributions to Caribbean modernism, we now turn to the critical moments of societal upheaval and transformation depicted in his novel. These historical events impel Arion’s characters to challenge and redefine their identities within the evolving context of the Dutch Caribbean. A central moment in Arion’s narrative is the 30 May 1969 labor strike in Curaçao, a critical juncture catalyzed

by labor disputes at the oil refinery. The workers protested unfair and oppressive conditions, which escalated into a general strike. The labor protest was driven by the unequal treatment and exploitation of workers of the Werkspoor Caribbean (Wescar), a Shell contractor on the island. The labor unions identified that the poor labor conditions were primarily caused by outsourcing to subcontractors, which was exploitative.<sup>29</sup> The next day, the labor unions’ protest, joined by “unemployed, disaffected youth,” culminated in a massive popular uprising fueled by dissatisfaction with the island’s racial disparity and the economic and political situation.<sup>30</sup> The historic city center went up in flames, with the primary targets being the cars, shops, and businesses of Ashkenazi Jewish and white entrepreneurs, who mostly belonged



Figure 4. Wigbertson Julian Isenia, *Burning of the City Center in 1969*, 2024, digital drawing using a graphics tablet, based on a historical photo from the *Amigoe* newspaper collection (photographer unknown), 37.59 × 34.32 cm (14.8 × 13.51 in.)





Figure 5. Wigbertson Julian Isenia, *Witnesses to the Flames in Punda in 1969*, 2024, digital drawing using graphics tablet, based on a historical photo from the Scriwanek I collection in the National Archive of Curaçao (photographer unknown), 23.41 × 34.32 cm (9.22 × 13.51 in.)



Figure 6. Wigbertson Julian Isenia, *Protesters and the Overturned Burning Car in 1969*, 2024, digital drawing using graphics tablet, based on a historical photo from the Spaarnestad collection in the Dutch National Archive (photographer unknown), 39.15 × 34.32 cm (15.41 × 13.51 in.)

to the white upper social class (see figs. 4, 5, and 6).<sup>31</sup> As one protester described, “We Curaçaoan workers have woken up from our slumber. We are no longer afraid of struggle, preferably peaceful struggle, but if all else fails, we struggle otherwise.”<sup>32</sup>

To quell the unrest, the national government requested the assistance of the Netherlands, which deployed Dutch marines already stationed at a Dutch military base in Curaçao, and additional troops were flown in from abroad. Some activist groups, such as the Dutch Antillean Action Committee in the Netherlands, viewed this as a neocolonial display of militarized power and a move to protect Dutch businesses on the island, such as Shell, Wescar, the Dutch bank ABN, KLM Airlines, the steamship company KNSM, Amstel Brewery, and the gas and electric company OGEM.<sup>33</sup> The following day, the city calmed down, and the trade union leaders demanded that the government resign. The trade unions felt that the govern-

ment was partly to blame for the precarious situation that had led to the protests. Ultimately, early elections were called. The uprising in 1969, which began as a labor protest demanding equal pay for all employees of the Shell oil refinery, created a ripple effect that led to the discussion and addressing of issues of race and class in Curaçaoan society. While some studies characterize this day as destructive, it brought about many structural changes.<sup>34</sup>

The protest embodied the aspirations of the student movement and the radical Left of the time. As Arion writes about 30 May in *De laatste vrijheid*, “Toen sloegen de vlammen uit de pan. De Vlammen van *verandering!* . . . Ja, de neger werd *mooi* door die brand!”<sup>35</sup> He argues that the uprising ignited a new social and political consciousness. Without this fiery revolt, the entrenched racial barriers might have remained unchallenged. Through that fire, a new social and political subject—a new form of consciousness—was born. Change necessitated it.

The 30 May 1969 protests in Curaçao sparked a cultural revolution, bolstering the Afro-Curaçaoan identity and expediting cultural emancipation. This event accelerated the standardization and formalization of Papiamentu orthography, which culminated in its recognition as an official language in 2007. Since then, literary output has been stimulated, with more literature, prose, and plays written in Papiamentu.

Trade union leaders observed a notable increase in self-confidence among Black Curaçaoans, who began to occupy previously inaccessible roles. Politically, the uprising led to significant changes, including the appointments of the first Black governor and lieutenant governor in Curaçao. A new national anthem was composed in 1978, and a Curaçaoan flag and national holiday, Dia di Bandera (day of the flag), were introduced in 1984. However, Antillean left-wing activists who wrote about anticolonial movements and socialist and Marxist ideology before the protest were slightly less enthusiastic about the outcomes. As Harold Hollander, one of the editors of the anticolonial and Marxist magazine *Kambio* in the Neth-

erlands, and later of the left-wing magazine *Vitó* in Curaçao, said in an interview in 1999, “De antillianisering is te snel gekomen. Ze konden de situatie niet aan, waren te onervaren. Tot op heden zijn dezelfde politieke structuren intact gebleven, inclusief het patronagesysteem.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, he expressed concerns over homogeneity in political party ideologies and the absence of a robust socialist perspective. These activists lamented that the deeper societal transformations they had envisioned—targeting racial, class, and sexual inequalities—had yet to be achieved.

In *De laatste vrijheid*, Arion offers an analysis of the 30 May 1969 uprising, exploring the evolving interpretations of it over the decades. Initially hailed as a triumph, 30 May began to be seen differently in the 1970s, as symbolizing a broader struggle against colonial and imperialist forces by the radical Left. By the 1980s, the narrative became more complex and critical. By the 1990s, reflection on 30 May was more contemplative and increasingly skeptical.<sup>37</sup> Arion characterized the 1969 uprising as a watershed year marked by transformative anger and heightened awareness. He also attributed the resurgence of Papiamentu to the Trinta di Mei 1969 (30 May 1969) protests, emphasizing the language’s historical role as a covert medium: “Trinta di Mei allowed us to recognize the subversive treasure we had in our language, which existed for centuries so we could keep secrets from the Dutch.”<sup>38</sup>

In *De laatste vrijheid*, Arion focuses on the protagonist Daryll, who relocates from Curaçao to Amber following the events of 30 May 1969, seeking freedom. Daryll explains, “Ik ben daar niet gelukkig, omdat ik een onafhankelijk voelend mens, die het liefst leeft in een onafhankelijk en vrij land. En dat kan op Curaçao niet. Het eiland is van Holland. Het leek erop dat het op weg naar de vrijheid was, maar dat is nu teruggedraaid.”<sup>39</sup> This sentiment of freedom reflects the national political decolonization of the islands, which officially decolonized the Dutch Caribbean islands yet kept them within the Kingdom of the Netherlands with more autonomy, and also reflects a desire for the freedom that the protests seemed to promise.



Daryll's move to Amber is influenced by the island's plan to introduce the Creole language as the official language of instructions in schools. The implementation of the Creole language is important, but it is only the beginning; it will be followed by "the last freedom," a more comprehensive and ultimate freedom: the modernist freedom to pursue autonomy, self-determination, and the emancipation of the individual or community from oppressive structures.

Arion's narrative includes exploration of a transgender character. Although various cultural practices reflect on the events of 30 May, the only significant representation of a trans\* or queer figure among them appears in this book—as a metaphorical volcano, portrayed as the harbinger of a potential apocalyptic future. In the novel, Daryll's newfound freedom is imperiled by a volcano, personified in the book's introductory chapter as a trans\* person who underwent a sex change. The volcano is first introduced as undergoing "een geslachtsverandering, die een groot bedoel bruiloft op beschamende wijze in de war stuurt."<sup>40</sup> The wedding would be the introduction of the local Creole in all schools, something that locals were preparing for thirty years. The volcano underwent "een karakterverandering."<sup>41</sup>

Arion extends this gendered perspective further in the book, intersecting with the notion of stereotypical femininity within stereotypical masculinity, as Daryll has always been the nurturing parent to their children. Conversely, it explores masculinity within femininity, exemplified by Adeline prioritizing her career over staying with her children. Daryll states, "Ik ben niet alleen hun vader. Ik ben vooral hun moeder. . . . In *The Castle of My Skin* van George Lamming [is er een bekende uitspraak:] My mother who fathered me. . . . Voor mijn kinderen is het: My father who mothered me."<sup>42</sup> More explicitly,

Hij had heel nadrukkelijk en specifiek een andere man willen zijn dan de meeste van zijn leeftijdgenoten. Hij had het machismo willen overwinnen en het was hem gelukt. Hij had de achterwerkjes van zijn baby'tjes schoongemaakt en hun luiers verwisseld. Hij was midden in de nacht opgestaan om ze eten te geven, omdat zijn vrouw de vol-

gende ochtend weer vroeg op het werk moest zijn punt hij had zijn slaap opgeofferd. Hij had zich seksueel terughoudend gedragen, en zich vooral geconcentreerd op wat haar behaagde.<sup>43</sup>

Or as Daryll explains about Adeline's career choices, "Ik moest het eerder als een eer zien, zei ze, dat ze zoiets kon doen [voor haar carrière kiezen]; met een rustig geweten weggaan, omdat ze wist dat ik niet alleen een vader maar ook een moeder voor de kinderen was."<sup>44</sup> And finally, "Ze kreeg de mannelijkheid die ze wilde, zoveel ze wilde cadeau. Hij stond haar zijn mannelijkheid af. Hij werd vrouw ja dat betekende het enige, dat hij voor hun twee kinderen niet echt gedaan had, was ze in zijn buik dragen, baren en borstvoeding geven."<sup>45</sup> However, Arion's depiction of gender roles, while attempting to subvert traditional binaries, inadvertently reinforces them by aligning nurturing with femininity and career ambition with masculinity. This binary approach oversimplifies the complexities of gender identity and roles. This binary idea is also applied to the volcano, which was seen for a long time as a "man" but is actually a transgender person, and sometimes implicitly a transgender man, who had "een regelmatige, onontkoombaar terugkerende cyclus. Een menstruatie! Alleen was de cyclus van de vulkaan geen maand maar vijfhonderd jaar."<sup>46</sup>

While a volcano can be interpreted as a revered force of nature that demands respect and care, as in Indigenous traditions, Arion depicts it in a manner that perpetuates heteronormative, transphobic, and sexist ideologies. The novel links the volcano to nationalist and culturalist agendas, portraying it as a phenomenon capable of negating the promotion of the Creole language. The narrative surrounding the protests and their aftermath essentially reinforces a perspective that is heteronormative, heterosexual, cisgender, misogynistic, and antitrans. This portrayal of the volcano ambiguously as a trans\* male-to-female person in-

volves preconceived notions of gender roles and stereotypes about who can be a hero, who is imagined as part of the postcolonial country, and who is seen as a cause of destruction.

Queer or trans\* characters are relatively rare in the Dutch Caribbean literary canon, yet the few works that address these themes provide critical insights. For instance, in Willem Kroon's 1923 novel *E no por casa* (She cannot marry), written in Papiamentu, the character Josefa is depicted as a woman who pursues same-sex relationships, offering a valuable perspective on how non-heteronormative identities are perceived.<sup>47</sup> She embodies shifting societal norms in the postindustrial era, marked by the establishment of an oil refinery on the island in the 1910s. During this period, writers associated with the Roman Catholic Church, wary of what they perceived as the dangers of modern life, used characters such as Josefa to denounce these emerging “sinful” lifestyles.

In Arion's narrative, the volcano is symbolically depicted as a disruptive force opposing cultural change. This force explicitly threatens the campaign Daryll leads to replace the colonial French language with Creole in the educational system. Both Josefa and the volcano are portrayed as figures that catalyze societal tension as they navigate the complexities of cultural transformation and resistance. Ultimately, despite a few casualties, the damage caused by these tensions is minimal. The book concludes, “De scholen zouden op 1 september beginnen, met het Creool als voertaal.”<sup>48</sup>

Volcanoes represented as trans\* figures are often depicted as forces that destroy the existing world order and that can obstruct postcolonial nation-building efforts, such as the adoption of Creole as an official language. To challenge these simplistic and binary constructs, it is crucial to amplify the voices of marginalized and underrepresented individuals in narratives surrounding and following 30 May 1969. As Aisha Leer summons us, we must *no lubidá e muhé* (not forget women)—and, I would add, transgender people—in the retelling of Trinta di Mei.<sup>49</sup>

### Act III: Dissonant Echoes and Pleasure

The scholarly discourse on Arion's *De laatste vrijheid* overlooks his portrayal of the volcano as a trans\* person. At first glance, this depiction might seem to reinforce rather than subvert negative stereotypes. However, a more in-depth analysis suggests that Arion strategically uses these tropes to critically examine societal views of trans\* identities. Arion depicts the volcano in a manner that perpetuates heteronormative, transphobic, and sexist ideologies. However, by incorporating this symbolism into Caribbean naturalism, Arion seems to subtly challenge these prevailing narratives surrounding transgender lives within a postcolonial framework, rather than reaffirm them. This nuanced approach serves to question traditional narratives and fosters a deeper examination of identity complexities in postcolonial



Figure 7. Kwynn Johnson, *Volcano Triptych 5/21*, 2021, graphite and watercolor on 140-lb. cold-pressed paper, each panel 22.5 × 15 cm (8.66 × 5.9 in.). Collection of Kwynn Johnson

contexts. This interpretive layer, although not explicitly stated by Arion, emerges through a critical reading against the grain, suggesting his intent to provoke thoughtful reassessment and dialogue.

This section integrates insights from transgender studies into broader discussions of Caribbean modernism and environmentalism, highlighting the intersections with themes of natural disasters, identity, and resistance. In the analysis, the volcano is anthropomorphized and likened to societal misrepresentations of transgender people, often unfairly labeled as “monsters.” This harmful stereotype portrays transgender individuals as frightening or unnatural, which can lead to dehumanization and justify mistreatment.

The volcano, depicted as a trans\* person, is categorized as a natural entity rather than a human one, suggesting a separation from human identity and experiences. In the novel, Arion writes, “Twist en oorlog zijn het teken, dat er hoe dan ook mensen in de buurt zijn; maar onbevattelijke natuurmanifestaties als overstromingen, orkanen, vulkaanuitbarstingen, bevestigen voor mij dat de natuur niet voor mensen bedoeld is.”<sup>50</sup> This reflects the unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of nature, paralleling societal perceptions of gender fluidity. Oren Gozlan’s concept of the “monstrous transsexual” in bathroom debates illustrates these deep-seated societal anxieties and unconscious fantasies about gender fluidity and identity.<sup>51</sup> Through this critical examination, I seek here to underscore the complexities of representation and the impact of cultural narratives on marginalized communities. This examination of gender fluidity bares fundamental societal tensions, while also fostering a transformative narrative that reflects the seismic shifts occurring across the Caribbean landscape.<sup>52</sup>

Building on Harlan Weaver’s interpretation of monstrous anger, which itself draws on Susan Stryker’s work on trans\* rage, this discussion explores the metaphorical significance of

volcanic transformation. Transitioning from the societal implications of gender fluidity, I draw a parallel between the emotional upheavals of trans\* rage and volcanic disruptions in Caribbean modernism. This comparison portrays volcanic eruptions as moments of profound change that reshape the physical landscape and the conceptual terrain of gender.<sup>53</sup>

Joseph M. Pierce’s assertion that “if modernity is that ideal, that architecture of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy that determines the futurity of all peoples, then modernity too must be rendered ash” resonates deeply in this context.<sup>54</sup> This perspective suggests that the explosive potential of volcanoes and the transformative rage of trans\* individuals alike serve to challenge and disrupt normative structures of identity and recognition. Pierce argues that “if colonization is an enterprise, then it is a thirst for death and debt. If settlers rely on a capitalist economy to prove their civilization, then that economy and that civilization must end, must be rendered a distant memory and a cautionary tale, if this world is to have a future.”<sup>55</sup> This notion underscores the imperative to dismantle the very foundations of modernity—capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. These entrenched structures must be obliterated and relegated to a distant memory. Such a radical transformation challenges existing power dynamics, paving the way for a future grounded in inclusivity and justice. Similarly, Stryker argues that the figure of Victor Frankenstein’s monster serves as a metaphor for the transgender experience, embodying a form of transgender rage that challenges and disrupts normative structures of identity and recognition. Encountering a transgender person’s body and consciousness reveals that the concept of “natural” is socially constructed. This realization can evoke feelings of violation and loss imposed by the gender system. While transgender people often suffer from others’ reactions, they also demonstrate that meaningful change and action are possible even within oppressive systems.<sup>56</sup>

Weaver contends that this rage, experienced through the prism of transsexuality and personified by the figure of Frankenstein’s monster, gives rise to a distinctive form of anger. This

anger, likened to the enveloping embrace of a kraken, penetrates into the act of reading, transforming, and facilitating change by drawing the reader into a deeply emotional engagement with the narrative.<sup>57</sup> This narrative of disruption transcends physical landscapes and extends into the realms of literature and theory, where the act of reading itself becomes a revolutionary experience. This process reshapes our perceptions of identity and gender, guiding us through a profoundly emotional journey that challenges and redefines conventional understandings.

In a trans\* response to natural disasters, or natural disasters as trans\*, our challenging of traditional narratives that surround environmental crises can pave the way for more sustainable and inclusive futures. By integrating these diverse threads of thought, we situate ourselves at the intersection of transgender studies and Caribbean studies, emphasizing their importance in exploring the relationships between identity, power, and the natural world. This integrative and transformative approach mirrors that of Kwynn Johnson's *Quiet as Drawings*, which reveals the Caribbean's volcanic history and its contemporary implications.

In the essay "Visualizing the Volcanic Caribbean," Johnson, an artist from Trinidad, presents a selection of her drawings from her art exhibition titled *Quiet as Drawings*. The show opened in March 2021 at Soft Box Art Gallery in Port of Spain, Trinidad.<sup>58</sup> This collection, comprising twenty-one graphite and watercolor triptychs (see fig. 7), is inspired by the 1957 novel *La danse sur le volcan* by Haitian author Marie Vieux-Chauvet.<sup>59</sup> Set on the eve of the Haitian Revolution, the novel serves as a backdrop for Johnson's series, which is placed in a contemporary volcanic landscape. The series acts as a visual metaphor for the significant shifts within Caribbean modernism, akin to the metamorphic processes of a volcano. It adeptly captures the dynamic tension between historical upheaval and the enduring Caribbean terrain, symbolized through the imagery of volcanoes. Johnson's work goes beyond simple representation, using a limited color scheme to explore the lives of two

women during a volcanic eruption. This focus disrupts the binary of destruction and renewal, prompting a deeper examination of the effects of disasters and their wider social impact. It encourages viewers to engage with both the historical and contemporary realities of the Caribbean, echoing the transformative potential of volcanoes discussed earlier.

In this essay, I have focused on the "what" and "when" aspects of Caribbean modernism. However, I have also continually considered other questions, such as "why" Caribbean modernism is necessary to study and "why now" is the opportune time for this inquiry. In *Patterns of Dissonance*, Rosi Braidotti examines the postmodernist trend that positions the notion of "woman" as a symbol of radical otherness, thereby placing it at the forefront of theoretical discourse. This examination provides a contextual background that helps our understanding of similar marginalization within Caribbean modernism.<sup>60</sup> This trend might be interpreted as the feminization of postmodern thought, initially suggesting a positive shift toward recognizing femininity. However, Braidotti cautions feminists to scrutinize this trend critically. She contends that simply emphasizing femininity within theoretical frameworks does not ensure that women's issues, needs, and claims are genuinely addressed.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the postmodernist proclamation of the "death of the subject" complicates matters further by reducing individuals, or "women," to mere linguistic and cultural constructs, potentially overlooking the actual lived realities and individual experiences of women. This reflection on the role of women in postmodern thought leads us to a broader consideration of how we interpret and engage with complex identities and experiences within the Caribbean, mirroring the depth of analysis found in Johnson's artwork.

Braidotti warns that the theoretical embrace of the feminine may be more stylistic than substantive and more symbolic than genuine. She stresses the importance of not assuming that these theoretical discussions will automatically lead to a profound understanding of, or advocacy for, women's rights and issues. Therefore, she urges feminists to critically assess



whether the focus on femininity in postmodernism truly aligns with feminist goals or whether it is merely a superficial, token gesture. Our examination here of the role of transgender people within postmodernist trends, as critiqued by Braidotti, has evolved into a broader reflection on the inclusivity of modernist and postmodernist frameworks. Braidotti's insistence on a critical evaluation of how the feminine is treated within theoretical discourse parallels this essay's inquiry into modernism's ability to authentically represent diverse experiences and identities. This critique of postmodernism's potential for tokenism calls for deeper, more meaningful engagement with the central issues of gender and identity studies.

Having examined first feminism's theoretical challenges in postmodernism, then the use of metaphor in Caribbean cultural analysis, this discussion has moved from abstract feminist debates to concrete explorations of identity and sexuality. Although this essay's sections are rooted in different contexts, they unite in their scrutiny of gender, identity, and societal norms, underscoring the necessity of nuanced, interdisciplinary approaches to complex issues of representation and advocacy. Vanessa Agard-Jones offers an example of this interdisciplinary approach by drawing a compelling comparison between the eruption of Saint-Pierre's volcano and the destruction of biblical city of Sodom.<sup>62</sup> She references Jacqui Alexander's critique of the Sodom metaphor's overwhelming and distorting influence on the interpretation of events and behaviors, especially those relating to nonnormative sexual practices, arguing that it overshadows other possible understandings.<sup>63</sup> However, Agard-Jones invites us to consider how the repeated use of the Sodom image could reveal insights into Saint-Pierre society's life and unspoken aspects at the beginning of the twentieth century. The metaphor may have been a covert way to discuss topics that were otherwise taboo, such as same-sex desire, nonconventional relationships, and gender nonconformity.<sup>64</sup>

Agard-Jones suggests that instead of viewing references to Sodom merely as moralistic judgments, we could understand them as subtle acknowledgments of a spectrum of behav-

iors and identities that could not be openly acknowledged or recorded in historical narratives. The volcano metaphor aptly encapsulates the dynamic and transformative nature of transgender studies, identities, and practices. As Emmanuel David notes, a volcano's geological process creates new land masses and fundamentally alters existing landscapes.<sup>65</sup> This natural phenomenon mirrors the progressive evolution of transgender studies, a field that continually redefines and broadens our comprehension of gender identities and expressions. The volcanic metaphor emphasizes the potency and impact of these shifts, highlighting how transgender studies, like volcanic activity, brings forth new formations in the landscape of gender understanding while reconfiguring existing perceptions and norms.

My analysis here has drawn on Jack Halberstam's concept of "failure" to explore the potential for political activism and change that emerges from queer and trans\* deviations from societal norms.<sup>66</sup> This notion of failure as a catalyst for transformation aligns with the central theme of this essay, underscoring the potential of disruption—whether through volcanic eruptions or the vocalization of marginalized voices—to forge new pathways and possibilities. Investigating Arion's legacy is both timely and essential, prompting us to consider the "what" and "when" and the "why." The transformative spirit of Caribbean modernism, transgender studies, and environmentalism advocates for a world where the ashes of outdated structures can give rise to a scenery enriched with diversity, inclusivity, and empowerment—provided we are open to being transformed by its impact.

## Endnotes

- 1 For more information on Guene, see Frank Martinus Arion, “The Value of Guene for Folklore and Literary Culture,” *History of Literature in the Caribbean 2* (2001): 415–19; Arion, “The Guene Kriole of the Netherlands Antilles: Its Theoretical and Practical Consequences for Better Understanding Papiamentu and Other Portuguese-Based Creoles,” in *Anales del Caribe*, 1984, 4–5; and Bart Jacobs, “The Upper Guinea Origins of Papiamentu: Linguistic and Historical Evidence,” *Diachronica* 26, no. 3 (2009): 319–79.
- 2 In Aruba, Papiamentu is spoken. Papiamentu has an etymologically structured spelling, while Papiamentu has a phonetically structured spelling.
- 3 S. Delgado, P. Angeli Lecompte, H. Lao, D. Ursulin Mopsus, E. Echteld, R. Severing, and N. Faraclas, “Education, Languages in Contact, and Popular Culture in the Hispanophone, Francophone, and Dutch Caribbean,” in N. Faraclas, R. Severing, C. Weijer, E. Echteld, W. Rutgers, and D. Dupey, eds., *Embracing Multiple Identities: Opting Out of Neocolonial Monolingualism, Monoculturalism and Mono-identification in the Dutch Caribbean* (Willemstad: University of Curaçao, 2016), 85–94.
- 4 Rose Mary Allen, “The Harvest Ceremony Seú as a Case Study of the Dynamics of Power in Post-emancipation Curaçao (1863–1915),” *Caribbean Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2010): 13–29.
- 5 Allen, “The Harvest Ceremony Seú.”
- 6 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 401.
- 7 Anita Patterson, “‘I’ve Known Rivers’: Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain, and the Emergence of Caribbean Modernism,” *Langston Hughes Review* 27, no. 1 (2021): 12–28.
- 8 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 9 “Amber is distinctive in that it abolished slavery without compensating the slave owners.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 13. Throughout this essay, translations of quoted passages from the novel are mine.
- 10 The Netherlands Antilles was the legal designation for the Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius, and Sint Maarten until 1986, functioning as a country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In 1986, Aruba obtained a separate status (Status Aparte), while the other islands remained within this structure. After 2010, the Netherlands Antilles ceased to exist. Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten became autonomous countries within the kingdom, while Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius became special municipalities of the Netherlands.  
“Sad island, sad people.” Cola Debrot, “Kwatrijnen uit Willemstad: December 1969,” *Ruku* 2, no. 2–3 (1970): 17.
- 11 Joris Gerits, “De receptie van Arions *De laatste vrijheid* kroniek,” *Dietsche Warande in Belfort, Jaargang 140* (1995): 657.
- 12 See Michael J. Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); and Leah Rosenberg, “Caribbean Models for Modernism in the Work of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys,” *Modernism/Modernity* 11, no. 2 (1 April 2004): 219–38.
- 13 Richard Begam and Michael Moses, *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899–1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Harper Montgomery, *The Mobility of Modernism: Art and Criticism in 1920s Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Samantha A. Noël, *Tropical Aesthetics of Black Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
- 14 Ronald Severing, “Recurrent Themes in the Work of Frank Martinus Arion,” in Nicholas Faraclas et al., eds., *Researching the Rhizome: Studies of Transcultural Language, Literature, Learning, and Life on the ABC Islands and Beyond* (Willemstad: University of Curaçao, 2013), 290.
- 15 Severing, “Recurrent Themes in the Work of Frank Martinus Arion,” 291.
- 16 Severing, “Recurrent Themes in the Work of Frank Martinus Arion.”
- 17 V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies, British, French, and Dutch in the West Indies and South America* (London: Macmillan, 1963), 29.
- 18 “Any contribution that could challenge Naipaul’s pessimistic view of the Caribbean was welcomed in Grenada.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 100.
- 19 “All his books were full of sunrise.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 274; italics in original.
- 20 “Europeans primarily see the sunset in the tropics. . . . They can easily imagine a tropical *sunset* because it can be easily associated with sadness. However, a *sunrise*! A tropical sunrise is unimaginable, indescribable, and irreproducible. . . . [Walcott’s] point of departure was the Caribbean.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 274.
- 21 Charles H. Rowell and Frank Martinus Arion, “An Interview with Frank Martinus Arion,” *Callaloo* 21, no. 3 (1 June 1998):

538–41.

- 22 Wim Rutgers, “Literary Magazines and Poetry in the Netherlands Antilles,” in A. James Arnold, ed., *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001), 564.
- 23 Rowell and Arion, “An Interview with Frank Martinus Arion,” 541.
- 24 Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 105.
- 25 “The independence of Suriname did not become the dream it was supposed to be. It increasingly turned into a nightmare!”; “She also had her reservations about independence. It was always announced as a gift for the entire people, but in reality, it seemed to be a gift for only a small group. Those who replaced the expatriates.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 97, 121.
- 26 “We have a very special way of celebrating our dependency. Where other states commemorate their Independence Day, we just celebrate a random day. Each island has one, so no one must envy another. We hold a contest for a day, a national anthem, and a flag. The song must especially give thanks that we are from that island and not another. And that settles it.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 181.
- 27 “I am glad that on 1 September, Creole will be introduced on Amber. That is more important than the eruption of the volcano. That is a real *eruption*! Here my life begins anew.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 247.
- 28 “Curaçao has stood still. Curaçao is truly a dead volcano. Here [on Amber], life is in motion: you could say it is erupting. It’s going somewhere.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 247.
- 29 Louis Philippe Romer, “May 30, 1969,” in Wim Kamps, Guido Rojer, and Iteke Witteveen, eds., *Contemporary Curaçao: A Caribbean Community* (Willemstad, Curaçao: Carib, 2013), 53–56.
- 30 Romer, “May 30, 1969,” 54.
- 31 Margo Groenewoud, “‘Nou Koest, Nou Kalm,’ De ontwikkeling van de Curaçaose samenleving, 1915–1973,” PhD diss., University of Leiden, 192.
- 32 Romer, “May 30, 1969,” 54.
- 33 “Het Nederlands koloniaal systeem toegepast op de ‘Nederlandse’ Antillen” (The Dutch colonial system applied to the “Netherlands” Antilles) (Amsterdam: [Aksikomite van Antiliannen in Nederland] Nationaal Archief, 1971).
- 34 William A. Anderson and Russell R. Dynes, “Civil Disturbances and Social Change: Comparative Analysis of the United States and Curaçao,” *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1976): 47.
- 35 “The fire broke out. The flames of change. . . . Yes, the Negro became beautiful because of that fire!” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 76; italics in original.
- 36 “Antillianization came too quickly. They [the new people in power] could not cope with the situation, were too inexperienced. To date, the same political structures have remained intact, including the patronage system.” Gert Oostindie, *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969: Verhalen over de revolte* (Curaçao, 30 May 1969: Stories about the revolt) (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 52; my translation.
- 37 Gerrit Willem Rutgers, *De brug van Paramaribo naar Willemstad: Nederlands-Caribische en Caribisch-Nederlandse literatuur, 1945–2005* (Willemstad: Fundashon pa Planifikashon di Idioma, Universiteit van de Nederlandse Antillen, 2007).
- 38 Simon Romero, “A Language Thrives in Its Caribbean Home,” *New York Times*, 4 July 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/05/world/americas/05curacao.html>. This deserves some nuance in that, historically, most social strata on the island, including different racial groups, could speak Papiamentu. However, the current situation may have changed, necessitating additional research.
- 39 “I am not happy there because I am an independent-minded person who prefers to live in an independent and free country. In addition, that is not possible on Curaçao. The island belongs to Holland. It seemed to be on the path to freedom, but that has now been reversed.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 246.
- 40 “A sex change that disruptively complicates a major wedding in an embarrassing manner.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 11.
- 41 “A character change.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 19.
- 42 “I am not just their father. I am primarily their mother. . . . This concept echoes a famous line from George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*: My mother who fathered me. . . . For my children, it is reversed: My father who mothered me.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 67.
- 43 “He had deliberately and explicitly aimed to be different from most men of his generation. He sought to overcome machismo, and he succeeded. He cleaned his babies’ bottoms and changed their diapers. He got up in the middle of the night to feed them because his wife had to go to work early the next morning, sacrificing his own sleep. He exercised sexual restraint, focusing primarily on what pleased his partner.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 94.
- 44 “She said I should see it as an honor that she could do such a thing [choose her career]; leave with a clear conscience because she knew that I was not just a father but also a mother to the children.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 107.
- 45 “She received the masculinity she wanted, as much as she wanted, as a gift. He surrendered his masculinity to her. Yes, he became a woman—that meant the only thing he hadn’t truly done for their two children was carry them in his womb,

- give birth, and breastfeed them.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 117.
- 46 “A regular, inescapably recurring cycle. A menstruation cycle! Only the cycle of the volcano was not a month but five hundred years.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 31.
- 47 Wigbertson Julian Isenia, “Looking for Kambrada: Sexuality and Social Anxieties in the Dutch Colonial Archive, 1882–1923,” *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 22, no. 2 (2019): 125–43.
- 48 “Schools were to start on 1 September, with Creole as the language of instruction”; Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 314.
- 49 Aisha Leer, “No Lubidá e Muhé [Do Not Forget the Woman]: A Short Biography of Women [sic] Involvement in Vito,” *Kristof* 10, no. 2 (2019): 10–16.
- 50 “Strife and war are the sign, that people are around no matter what; but incomprehensible natural manifestations like floods, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions confirm to me that nature is not meant for humans.” Arion, *De laatste vrijheid*, 84.
- 51 Oren Gozlan, “Stalled on the Stall: Reflections on a Strained Discourse,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3–4 (2017): 451–71.
- 52 Anson Koch-Rein, “Monster,” *TSQ : Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 134–35.
- 53 Harlan Weaver, “Monster Trans: Diffracting Affect, Reading Rage,” in *TransGothic in Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018), 119–38. Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2013), 244.
- 54 Joseph M. Pierce, “A Manifesto for Speculative Relations,” in Christina Sharpe, ed., *Five Manifestos for the Beautiful World* (Toronto: Alchemy by Knopf Canada, 2024), 26.
- 55 Pierce, “A Manifesto for Speculative Relations.”
- 56 As Susan Stryker writes, transgender speech is both vital and risky. It can attract normativizing forces, limit gender alternatives, rigidify identities, institutionalize discourse, and privilege certain speakers. Despite these risks, it is crucial for rethinking the historical construction of the human and for including those previously excluded from the concept of humanness. Stryker, “Tranxing the Queer (In) human,” in *When Monsters Speak: A Susan Stryker Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024), 156–57.
- 57 Harlan Weaver, “Monster Trans: Diffracting Affect, Reading Rage,” in *TransGothic in Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018), 119.
- 58 Kwynn Johnson, “Visualizing the Volcanic Caribbean,” *Edge Effects*, 12 November 2021, <https://edgeeffects.net/quiet-as-drawings-kwynn-johnson/>.
- 59 See Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Femmes of Color, Femmes de Couleur: Theorizing Black Queer Femininity through Chauvet’s *La danse sur le volcan*,” *Yale French Studies* 128 (2015): 131–45. Curtis Small, “The Ambiguities of Agency: Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *La danse sur le volcan*,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* (2009): 239–55.
- 60 Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women and Contemporary Philosophy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
- 61 Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*.
- 62 Vanessa Agard-Jones, “What the Sands Remember,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2–3 (2012): 325–46.
- 63 M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 64 Agard-Jones, “What the Sands Remember.”
- 65 Emmanuel David, “Transgender Archipelagos,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2018): 332–54.
- 66 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

# Jerry Philogene

Beyond and against  
the Archives: Luce Turnier,  
a Feminist Haitian Modernist

**JERRY PHILOGENE** is Associate Professor and Director of the Black Studies Program at Middlebury College where she specializes in interdisciplinary American cultural history, art history, and visual arts of the Caribbean and the African diaspora with an emphasis on the Francophone Caribbean. Her publications have appeared in peer-reviewed journals and exhibition catalogues. Dr. Philogene is also an independent curator. In 2023, she co-organized with Dr. Katherine Smith the *Myrlande Constant: The Work of Radiance*, an exhibition and accompanying catalogue on the contemporary textile works of Haitian artist Myrlande Constant at the Fowler Museum, UCLA, 2023. She is the recipient of a 2020 Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her current book manuscript “The Socially Dead and Improbable Citizen: Visualizing Haitian Humanity and Visual Aesthetics.” She is also writing a monograph on Haitian modernist painter, Luce Turnier.



If the Haitian painting is a mirror of our people and its landscapes rather than a nonbeing of swans collected from drawing book mills, it is thanks to these three characters among whom Luce stands out with a reserved brilliance. Shy, feminine.

—Jacques Gabriel, *Luce Turnier au Centre d'Art* (exhibition brochure), 1974

In a photograph taken by the well-known Haitian photographer Louis Doret in 1945 at the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince, documenting what may have been an exhibition opening, eighteen well-dressed individuals pose formally (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> At the center, in the front row, is the artist Luce Turnier, seated between Harold Hilgard Tittmann Jr., the US ambassador to Haiti at that time, and DeWitt Peters, the man with the moustache. Peters was an American watercolorist who helped establish the Centre d'Art and served as its first director. Among the artists flanking them are Lucien Price, Antonio Joseph, Rigaud Benoit, Georges "Geo" Remponeau, Maurice Borno, and Tamara Baussan.<sup>2</sup> They variously face Doret's camera or look off to the side. Some appear stiff and frozen in the formality of the moment; others smile, while others seem distracted and look away from Doret's camera. Turnier, legs crossed, and hands folded on her lap, stares directly into Doret's camera as if *she* is fully cognizant of the importance of this photograph and her place in this assembly.



Figure 1. Gathering at Centre d'Art, Port-au-Prince, 1945. At the center, in the front row, is the artist Luce Turnier, seated between Harold Hilgard Tittmann Jr., the US ambassador (12 July 1946–17 July 1948) and DeWitt Peters, the American watercolorist who helped establish the Centre d'Art and served as its first director. Among the artists flanking them are Lucien Price, Antonio Joseph, Rigaud Benoit, Georges "Geo" Remponeau, Maurice Borno, and Tamara Baussan. Courtesy of Jézabel Traube and Leonora Carpi de Resmini

Another photograph, taken in October of the same year, places Turnier once again at the center, seated between Emmanuel Lafond and Daniel Lafontant in the white suit at a meeting of the Comité d'Administration (board of directors) (fig. 2). They are seated more informally around a table; this photograph also seems staged to suggest an air of serious purpose and importance. Peters, the white man with the moustache near the open door, holds a pen in one hand and a cigarette in another, as if he is recording the proceedings from the meeting. All eyes seem to be on the suited gentleman who has his back to the camera, cigarette in hand. While Turnier is not at the center of the frame, she is made to be the compo-

sitional focus thanks to the diagonal axis that runs from the speaker (suited gentleman), who has the attention of the committee members, to Turnier. Her relaxed pose and the smile on her face exude a sense of comfort with her position as the lone woman within this circle of men. Compositionally, the door frame of the balcony's open doorway also draws the viewer's eyes to Turnier's central position within this gathering of men.



Figure 2. Meeting of the Comité d'Administration, Centre d'Art, Port-au-Prince, October 1945. The Comité d'Administration was made up of artists and cofounders of the Centre. It consisted of Borno as president; Remponeau as treasurer; Albert Mangonès as secrétaire général; Gérald Bloncourt and Raymond Coupeau as assistant secretaries; Raymond Lavelanette as librarian; and Price, André Lafontant, Rev. James Petersen, and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin as advisers. From right to left: Rev. James Petersen, Maurice Borno, Emmanuel Lafond, Luce Turnier, Daniel Lafontant, Raymond Coupeau, DeWitt Peters, Lucien Price, Albert Mangonès, unidentified man, unidentified man, Georges "Geo" Remponeau and Gérald Bloncourt. Courtesy of Jézabel Traube and Leonora Carpi de Resmini

In a later and less formal photograph, Turnier dines with American folk art critic and dealer Selden Rodman and American sculptor Jason Seley at Villa Créole, a popular hotel in Haiti (fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> The close proximity of the individuals and setting suggests a familiar relationship between them. Rodman, a supporter of the artists and artisans who were associated with the Centre, was instrumental in promoting their work in New York. Seley helped start the sculpting program at the Centre.



Figure 3. Turnier with American folk art critic and dealer Selden Rodman and American sculptor Jason Seley at Villa Créole, date unknown. Courtesy of Jézabel Traube and Leonora Carpi de Resmini



These three photographs index Turnier's contradictory absence from and presence in the historiography of modern Haitian art specifically and in mid-twentieth-century art of the African diaspora more generally. While all three photographs document her central, physical presence in the formative years of the Centre, she is minimally present in the written archives and in the canon of Haitian art history as defined by the secondary literature.<sup>4</sup> Tellingly, when, at one point, the first two photographs were displayed on the Centre's website, the names of the male members of the Comité d'Administration were listed but not Turnier's, despite her obvious presence in the photographs. Her visibility in these images contradicts yet compounds her *conspicuous invisibility* in the narratives of twentieth-century modern Haitian art. She exists precariously at the center and at the margin of artistic discourse simultaneously. While she is mentioned in exhibition catalogues, biographical dictionaries, book chapters, and dissertations, she has never been given significant credit in the formation of the field in the ways that others have. The "Creole" artists Hector Hyppolite, Philomé Obin, Rigaud Benoit, André Pierre, and Préfète Duffaut are extolled as the "fathers of Haitian art." Their existence, formation, and participation in the Haitian art history canon is well documented.<sup>5</sup> Modernist artists such as Turnier, Jacques Gabriel, and Roland Dorcély are relegated to brief mentions as being "important," and "the first to . . ." yet remain understudied and underexhibited.<sup>6</sup> Through these silences, what is being produced is an episteme and expressive cultural tradition dependent on and intensified by biases that include elements of sexism, classism, patriarchy, and paternalism.

My interest in Turnier began several years ago when I was researching and completing my dissertation.<sup>7</sup> One of my chapters focused on the establishment of the Centre d'Art, which originated in 1944 through government support as an exhibition space, studio, and school for artists as well as a meeting space for artists, curators, and collectors from around the world. During my research in the Centre's archives, I encountered a trove of information about DeWitt Peters, one of the founding members of the Centre; the self-taught artists,

mostly men, who worked and studied at the Centre; and the international artists who had taught there.<sup>8</sup> During the establishment of the Centre, the priority appears to have been to promote the work of the self-taught, or "Creole," artists, whose historical paintings and Vodou iconography rapidly became characteristic of Haitian art. Turnier, Dorcély, and Gabriel, who were seeking new forms and new imagery for self-expression, did not conform to what was coming to be narrated and written about as Haitian art.<sup>9</sup>

However, years of conversations with artists, curators, gallery directors, and art historians based in Haiti, Europe, and North America, revealed that there were several women artists who were active at the Centre during its formation and development. Little written information exists about the women who managed the Centre and the women artists who took classes and taught there, such as painter and sculptor Marie-Josée Nadal (later Marie-Josée Nadal-Gardère) and painters Rose-Marie Desruisseau and Andrée Malebranche. Why have they not been given the equal amount of written space that the male, self-taught Creole artists have received in the historical documentation?<sup>10</sup> In some cases they have been overlooked specifically as forerunners of the modernist art movement in Haiti—a movement that encompasses the aesthetic, linguistic, and religious elements of Black and African representational practices that demand a refashioning of the self. Apart from brief mentions in essays, book chapters, and websites, these women have not been studied as thoroughly as male colleagues who were more engaged in Vodou iconography and scenes of markets and jungles.

What would it mean to study a known yet underrecognized transnational, Haitian modernist painter within mid- to late twentieth-century arts of the African diaspora? What would it mean to write about a particular formative moment that goes against the well-documented and conventional masculinist narrative of art history? What might a slight shifting and re-imagining of an origin story, or a closer looking into what has been written of that history,

bring about? What might be some of the art-historical implications of a narrative that not only includes women but centers them? What is at stake in an inquiry to articulate the artwork of a figure like Luce Turnier—a Black Haitian woman? An archival excavation on the life and creative practices of this underrepresented, underdiscussed artist is necessarily beyond the scope of this essay. However, as a point of departure, I propose theoretical underpinnings that might inform such an undertaking: two foundational essays and a theoretical intervention; one poses a way of understanding the problem of Turnier’s inexplicit elision in the archives, and the other two offer a critique and possible corrective.

The first is a chapter in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* by Michel-Rolph Trouillot titled “An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-event.” Among other things, the chapter focuses on the insurrection that brought about Haitian independence at the end of the eighteenth century. The chapter offers two tropes that Trouillot describes as *failures of narration*. Both tropes offer a narrative of invisibility that derives from and transcends the historical specificity of the Revolution: one *erases* the factual event of the Haitian Revolution in written text—a *formula of erasure*—the other *trivializes* the actual event, lessening its effect—a *formula of banalization*.<sup>11</sup> Like racism, sexism, and patriarchy, these formulas operate simultaneously to erase, on the one hand, and banalize, on the other, thereby ultimately delegitimizing the artistic production of Black Caribbean women. What is then rendered is their absence from the origin story, or their participation is rendered insignificant and eventually neutralized.

The second essay, “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s That Center the Art of Black Women Artists,” by the art historian Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, introduces the concept of Afrofemcentrism.<sup>12</sup> Tesfagiorgis proposes a Black feminist art history that would be sufficiently epistemologically capacious to allow for transatlantic and transcultural creative practices, and a critique of the practice of art-historical discourses that have historically placed

Black women as the objects of the gaze rather than as creators. Most important, Tesfagiorgis emphasizes that “Black feminist art criticism must both utilize aspects of existing paradigms and introduce new ways of thinking about art” that “speak across the boundaries of race, class, gender . . . to be enriched by and to enrich existing knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, for Tesfagiorgis and Trouillot, it is crucial to question what is written and what it means to necessarily resist the basic hierarchal sexist and racist assumptions of an art-historical canon and ask how we write beyond and against it. Black feminist art historians such as Tesfagiorgis, Judith Wilson, Leslie King-Hammond, Lowery Stokes Sims, Michele Wallace, and Huey Copeland, and artists Lorraine O’Grady and Adrian Piper, to name a few, have employed a kaleidoscope of art-historical and interdisciplinary discourses, including social art history, Black cultural theory, and Black feminist theory to transform Black women artists from positions of objectification, misrepresentation, and omission to positions where “we collectively active our knowledge and power” to “inscribe new discourses on art wherein we can locate our histories and construct critiques that will appropriately inscribe our lives, production, and interventions in this world,” thus combatting the exclusivity of the art-historical canon and ultimately contributing to the new growth of a more comprehensive art history and larger art-world practices.<sup>14</sup>

Another such site is offered by Caribbean feminist anthropologist and performance artist Gina Athena Ulysse’s dynamic concept of *rasanblaj*—a deliberate gathering space that “blurs genres, shifting location, time, and space.” Ulysse describes *rasanblaj* as “an explicitly decolonial project,” and further suggests, “*rasanblaj* demands that we consider and confront the limited scope of segregated frameworks to explore what remains excluded in this landscape that is scorched yet full of life, riddled with inequities.”<sup>15</sup> Such interdisciplinary and multivocal approaches are of significance to art history in general and to Black feminist studies, Haitian studies, and Black modernism specifically. They offer a “strategic looking” to uncover what is visible yet made invisible in histories and in the archives.



Luce Turnier was twenty-one when she began studying at the Centre d'Art in 1945.<sup>16</sup> Her struggling, rural middle-class family had relocated from Jacmel to Port-au-Prince in 1937 after a hurricane devastated the southern towns of Jacmel and Jérémie in 1935. Having studied composition and design with Georges "Geo" Remponeau and African American painter Eldzier Cortor, in 1949 Turnier received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to study at the Art Students League of New York for six months.<sup>17</sup> There she studied with painters Morris Kantor, who strongly influenced her attention to cubism, and Harry Sternberg, whose concentration on the figure can be seen in the fluid figurations of her portraits. A year later, at the gentle prodding of John Marshall, Turnier received a grant from the Institut Français d'Haïti to study at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, where she was exposed to model drawing workshops, abstract expressionism, and other forms of modern art aesthetics.<sup>18</sup> She would stay in Paris until 1955, supporting herself with financial assistance from her family and friends, through sales of her work, and additional funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and the French government. While in Paris, Turnier attended meetings of the burgeoning socialist and communist organizations that, during the mid-1950s, were meeting spaces for young-Afro-Caribbean and African students, musicians, writers, and visual artists who were engaged in enthusiastic discussions about peoples of African descent, linked by a shared history of enslavement and imperialism. In this regard the art historian and curator Salah Hassan reminds us that "an analysis of any key Western metropolis such as Paris or London provides numerous examples of how African and Caribbean immigrant writers, poets, and artists have laid claim to the spaces of the Western metropolis and reworked ideas of exile, nation, and citizenship in ways that defy any easy reading of Otherness."<sup>19</sup>

Like other Caribbean, African, and African American writers and artists who left the United States to live a permanent or expatriate life in Europe, Turnier relocated to Paris in 1960 moving between Paris, and Haiti, making frequent trips to New York, with a final return to Haiti in 1977.<sup>20</sup> 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. A deep dive into Turnier's transnational life and creative practice reveals transatlantic reverberations during a historical moment when the image of the Black figure was used to voice concerns around imperialism, colonization, and racialized identities.

From 1945 to 1990, Turnier had a continuous if underrecognized exhibition record in France, other European countries, the United States, and Haiti. As we know, the dominant history of Western modernism omits or sidelines artists who have made the political and personal choice to stay on the islands. But in Turnier's case, it is not only her geographic location that has rendered her oeuvre marginalized but also her working outside of what canonically has been recognized as "Haitian art." Writing about Haitian fiction writers, literary critic Marie José N'Zengou-Tayo notes,

Haitian women have struggled to make their voice heard. An analysis of their social condition shows that whatever their class, their tremendous contribution to their country and to the economy has never been thoroughly assessed. This social and economic "invisibility" has been reproduced in the field of culture. As writers and artists, they are seen as deviant and marginalized. However, these women have challenged quietly yet decisively male stereotypes concerning them. . . . They have tried to redefine themselves, subverting the dominant male discourse that sought to silence them.<sup>21</sup>

In Turnier's case, her adherence to modernism is both her challenge to stereotype and the cause of the silence surrounding her work. From the mid-1940s through the late 1980s, in Haiti, New York, and Paris, Turnier created a body of work that encompasses still life, landscapes and portraits, drawing, and collage. Her work ethic was noted by her contemporaries from the start. In a letter dated 10 November 1949, DeWitt Peters wrote to his friend Anne Kennedy, "Shortly I am going down for Luce and Maurice [Borno]'s opening. I think

they've both gained a lot—perhaps especially Maurice . . . couldn't find a place so I offered her the little house at the end of the garden here and she is installed. I hope you don't mind. . . . She is extremely serious about getting on with her work and plans to go downtown only when she has a class or it is otherwise necessary."<sup>22</sup>

Her still life paintings capture the flora symbolism of Haiti, using the visual language of modernism, attempting in her use of diagonal, vertical, and horizontal lines to draw a synthesis of balance, rhythm, color, and form. In her still lifes, block-like abstract patterns form the background to display images of coconuts, eggplants, plantains, beets, green onions, and peppers, highlighting her attention to shape, perspective, gradation of colors and tone, amid a painted geometric flatness, all things that an attention to still life painting and a modernist aesthetic seek to do. By contrast, her black ink figure drawings and her limited palette of browns, blues, ambers, and yellows in portraits of working-class and middle-class Haitian men and women arguably reflect the influence of abstract expressionism on Turnier's pictorial aesthetic and abstract mark-making practice.<sup>23</sup> Deceptively simple in her use of color and tone, her visual language is clearly one of traditional portraiture.<sup>24</sup>

Through Turnier's fascination with figuration, she created portraits of introspection and exploration that captured friends and family members, while others were character portrayals illustrating the quiet elegance and dignity of individuals she would meet in the marketplace or who worked in her home. Her ink drawings were often sketches for what would later become paintings; the paintings illustrate a quiet interiority, a gentle pathos and detailed individuality that distinguishes them from the quintessential and generalized figures of the market women that we associate with Haitian art specifically and Caribbean art in general. In her portraits, she immortalized individuals who existed outside the dominant cultures of society. She didn't simply give people back their humanity, she delicately recorded it. In a 1983 interview with filmmaker Danny Pietrodangelo filmed in Haiti, with *Untitled (Portrait of*

*a Young Boy*) (circa 1980) (fig. 6) on the ground next to her, she states, "From 1965 to 1972 I was doing more abstract work. Now I am doing people because I enjoy it very much. . . . In Haiti especially. . . . It is not because I am a naturalist . . . but I think people are very graceful. I am very interested in the figure more than anywhere else. I think the landscapes are more beautiful in France, I like and enjoy to do more landscapes in France, but I enjoy more to do people here."<sup>25</sup>

In this short documentary, the viewer can sense Turnier's isolation and her deep bitterness at the reception of those she identifies as the Haitian bourgeoisie. She notes that the modernist artists were widely described as "punks" and "hippies." Yet, even with this disregard and the lukewarm attention to her work, she reveals her love of working with Haitian models.



Figure 6. Luce Turnier, *Untitled (Portrait of a Young Boy)*, circa 1980; oil on canvas, 47 in. × 29 in. Private collection

In *Untitled* (1986) (fig. 4), a slim young Black woman looks off to the left beyond the picture frame. This outward direction allows the viewer to observe her. She wears a simple white shirt, and white headwrap covers her head. The folds of the shirt and headwrap are loosely painted and accented by brushstrokes of black and white paint. Placed against an unadorned background of tones of ochre and brown, she appears to be relaxed based on the tilt of her shoulders and the soft expression on her face. On her face smooth, warm tonal browns fan over her forehead, nose, and chin and lead the eye to the rich browns of her neck and shoulders.

Opposite page  
Figure 4. Luce Turnier, *Untitled*, 1986; oil on Masonite.  
Collection of John M. Black, Washington, DC



In another more formal portrait, *Untitled* (1986) (fig. 5), a slender young Black woman also looks beyond the picture frame, slightly to the right edge of the composition. Unlike in the previous image, her clothes are more reserved, perhaps her school uniform or her “Sunday best.” The blended white and gray tones of her dress collar draw the eye to her graceful neck and beautifully frame her face, as do the two brown lines that mark the wall behind her, almost pushing the figure closer to the foreground. Patches of warm browns and shades of gray spread across her face, shaping her nose and undersides of her eyes and cheek bones and giving a slight hint of the fullness of her nose and lips. In both pieces, Turnier frames the figures so that their upper bodies take up the entire canvas, forcing the viewer to focus specifically on the serene facial expressions of both sitters and the varying shades of browns, blacks, and grays that animate their skin tones. Both pieces capture simultaneously the impressionist and modernist style in brushstrokes and use of color that render the sitters as individuals in stark reflective clarity.

Opposite page  
Figure 5. Luce Turnier, *Untitled*, 1986; oil on Masonite.  
Collection of John M. Black, Washington, DC





Vulnerably expressing her marginalization as a woman and as a modernist, Turnier reveals the synergy between her and her models that allowed her to capture their subjectivity and highlight their expression of personality and mood, underscoring their individuality in a moment in time. Her brushstrokes blend into strikingly realistic images. The brilliance of Turnier's portraits lies not only in what she was able to capture in her subjects' facial features and body posture; it is also in what the portraits emote and radiate in their composition.<sup>26</sup>

To celebrate Black subjectivity can be a rebellious act. While Turnier may not have been considered or labeled herself as a feminist, her paintings and drawings of nude and clothed Black women and Black men nevertheless exhibit a feminist ethos within formal modernist aesthetic practices, presenting the complex nature of racial looking and class representation. Her expressive portraits depicting images of rural and working-class Haitian women—the market women, female domestic workers, and female tenant farmers—as subjects of grace and dignity lend themselves to a reevaluation of the aesthetics of beauty and to the formal and conceptual role of the Black female figure. Rendered with soft brushstrokes and chromatically muted backgrounds, the tranquility and serenity of these women vibrate on the canvas. An attentive examination of her work, particularly her portraits, paying close attention to her use of pose, color gradation, form, and representation, can help us consider the power and potentiality of her portraits as conceptual provocateurs in a space that primarily promoted Vodou iconography and the sexualization of the Black female body. Turnier proposes an alternative genealogy, an alternative history of what we understand as Haitian art, in which a Black woman is placed at the center of exploration. Never idealizing or sexually “primitivizing” the Black female or male body, as was often customary in Western painting traditions, Turnier's portraits, from the black ink and pencil drawings of the 1960s to the limited palette paintings of the 1980s and 1990s, instead reflect an interest in redefining the imagery of working-class Haitians, while her still life paintings capture the symbolic and material forms of Haitian life.

In the foreword to the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Silencing the Past*, Hazel Carby writes, “We learn how scanty evidence can be repositioned to generate new narratives, how silences can be made to speak for themselves to confront inequalities of power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives. We need to make these silences speak and, in the process, lay claim to the future. For, as Trouillot warns, ‘While some of us debate what history is or was, others take it into their own hands.’”<sup>27</sup>

The archives tell us that Turnier exhibited and traveled, but it is the “writing” of that history that privileges a particular type of art coming from a Haitian artist. What if we were to employ what I proposed earlier in the essay, a “strategic looking,” a deep, thoughtful looking that *recognizes*, *acknowledges*, and *allows* for different modalities of seeing to comprehend what is not supposed to be seen, what is not to be known. The photographs discussed at the beginning of this essay necessitate a “strategic looking” that is crucial to disrupting a particular narrative and challenging a particular origin story. They show us that Turnier was there—indexing her presence at the Centre and at the *center*, not on the *margins* as the written materials tell us. These photographs act as documented sources to index her centrality. They are compelling illustrations of the visual's ability to generate a different comprehension of, and at times oppose, what has been narrated, what has been written, and what has been understood as part of the history of Black diasporic modern art. Furthermore, a repositioning of Turnier's creative oeuvre is a tectonic shift. It rejects the dominant masculinist art-historical narratives to reveal the profound and overlooked roles that she and other Haitian women artists at the Centre d'Art played in shaping and advancing diverse Black feminist creative practices and Black modernism and their formative role in the historical understanding of Haitian modern art specifically and Caribbean feminist modern art practices generally.

## Endnotes

- 1 A different version of this essay will appear in the series *Clark Studies in the Visual Arts*, published by The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. “Louis Doret was a leading photojournalist in Haiti in the mid-twentieth century. He photographed newsworthy events, including Haiti’s interactions with the United States. His images were commonly published in newspapers such as *Haiti Sun*. Doret also photographed Haitian landscapes and historic landmarks. He sometimes printed these images photographically on postcards.” Library of Congress, “Latin America and the Caribbean in Photographs at the Library of Congress: Photojournalism,” n.d., <https://guides.loc.gov/latin-america-caribbean-photos/> photojournalism. He was also a studio photographer. Not pictured in this photo is the artist Andrée Malebranche; she, Turnier, and Tamara Baussan were among the few women artists teaching at the Centre during its early years.
- 2 Tamara Baussan was a Russian-born painter who married Robert Baussan, an architect and owner of the well-known hotel Ibo Lele located in Pétion-Ville. The photograph shows, standing left to right: an unidentified man; Tony (last name unknown), a cabinetmaker and photographer at the Centre d’Art; Rigaud Benoit; Antonio Joseph; Raymond Coupeau, a member of the board; Lucien Price; Georges Remponeau; Jean Chenet; Maurice Borno; Robert Dorsainville; and an unidentified man. In front of the unidentified man is Robert Baussan; the man in the white is unidentified. The gentleman with his hands in his pockets is Max Ewald, an architect and interior designer. Front row: Harold Hilgard Tittmann Jr.; Luce Turnier; DeWitt Peters; and Tamara Baussan. I thank art historian Gérald Alexis for identifying the individuals in this photograph and for many years of guidance and wonderful conversations.
- 3 Seley is the one with the jacket. This undated photograph was probably taken between 1946 and 1953. The sculptor Jason Seley arrived in Haiti in January 1946 and taught life-modeling classes at the Centre. Seley was good friends with Albert Mangonès, a leading sculptor and architect, from their undergraduate days at Cornell University. Mangonès was also one of the founding members of the Centre d’Art and in 1968 created the iconic monumental bronze sculpture *Le marron inconnu* (The unknown maroon), which stands opposite the National Palace in Port-au-Prince. Seley would return to Haiti often from 1946 through 1953, exhibiting and teaching classes at the Centre.
- 4 Lindsay Twa’s essay, “The Rockefeller Foundation and Haitian Artists: Maurice Borno, Jean Chenet, and Luce Turnier,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 37–72, offers a deeply thorough analysis of the Rockefeller Foundation’s support of these three individuals, especially Turnier. Twa relies heavily on written correspondence between John Marshall and Turnier. Marshall served as assistant director of the Foundation’s Humanities Division from 1933 to 1940 and then associate director from 1940 to 1962. Writer and collector John Hewitt’s “The Evolution of Luce Turnier,” *Black Art: An International Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1978): 48–63, details Turnier’s initial interest in drawing, her evolution as an artist in Haiti and in Paris, and her determination to perfect her artistic techniques. Hewitt notes that it was one of Turnier’s brothers who brought her drawings of medicinal plants to DeWitt Peters, the Centre d’Art’s director. Turnier had been drawing these medicinal plants since the age of thirteen, when she was a student at the École Normale. Upon seeing the drawings, Peters enrolled Turnier in the art classes. Both Twa’s and Hewitt’s essays are essential in documenting Twa’s oeuvre. However, they do not address her skills and creativity as an artist in any great detail.
- 5 In her essay, “Kiskeya–Lan Guinée–Eden,” LeGrace Benson uses the term *Creole* rather than “Haitian primitives,” “naïves,” or “popular painters” to “call to mind historical, sociolinguistic conditions and implies no specific aesthetic judgment or artistic style.” Benson, “Kiskeya–Lan Guinée–Eden: The Utopian Vision in Haitian Painting,” *Callaloo* 15, no. 3 (1 July 1992): 727. I am not suggesting that the brilliant and rich Vodou imagery depicted in the work of Hector Hyppolite, Rigaud Benoit, Préfète Duffaut, André Pierre, and others is not central to the creation of modern Haitian art. What I am suggesting is that those were the *only* images promoted by the Centre. Artists like Turnier, and her contemporaries Remponeau, Mangonès, and Borno, were underappreciated and not promoted since they did not create works that affirmed, in the minds of Europeans and Americans, a “dark and dangerous” Haiti and its “demonic” religion.
- 6 Both Gabriel and Dorcély spent time in Paris, Dorcély from September 1951 to July 1954 and again from September 1957 to 1965 (with a year in Conakry, Guinea, in 1961–62). Gabriel was in Paris in 1959. Loevenbruck, Paris, displayed several works by Roland Dorcély during 2019 *Frieze* New York.
- 7 Jerry Philogene, “National Narratives, Caribbean Identities, Diasporic Memories: Haitian and Jamaican Modern Art, 1920–1950” (PhD diss., New York University, 2009).
- 8 These artists visited Haiti in the following years: William Edouard Scott, 1931; Aaron Douglas, 1938; James Porter, 1946; Richmond Barthé, 1948; Harlan Jackson, 1948–51; Eldzier Cortor, 1949–51; and Ellis Wilson, 1950–51. Lois Mailou Jones spent years visiting and living in Haiti after her marriage to Haitian graphic designer Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël in 1953. For a published account of Barthé’s Haitian experience and an analysis of his work while in Haiti, see Margaret Rose Vendryes, “Brothers under the Skin: Richmond Barthé in Haiti,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 117. Barthé would travel regularly to Haiti between the years 1953 to 1969. In 1953, he completed a forty-foot statue of Jean Jacques Dessalines for the city of Port-au-Prince. Additional essays on this topic include Krista Thompson, “Preoccupied with Haiti: The Dream of Diaspora in African American Art, 1915–1942,” *American Art Journal* (Fall 2007): 75–97; Harriet G. Warkel, “Image and Identity: The Art of William E. Scott, John W. Hardrick, and Hale A. Woodruff,” in William E. Taylor and Harriet G. Warkel, eds., *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African American* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art and Indiana University Press, 1996), 17–76; Lindsay Jean Twa, “Troubling Island: The Imagining and Imaging of Haiti by African-American Artists, 1915–1940” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006); and Twa, *Visualizing Haiti in U.S. Culture, 1910–1950* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014).
- 9 On 11 August 1950, Roland Dorcély, Lucien Price, Max Pinchinat, Dieudonné Cédor, and Luckner Lazard left the Centre and founded the Foyer des Arts Plastiques.
- 10 Rose-Marie Desruisseau attended classes and taught at the Académie des Beaux-Arts (Academy of Fine Arts), established in Port-au-Prince in 1959 under the directorship of Italian sculptor Marco Amerigo Montagutelli. Montagutelli cast the well-known sculpture *Le marron inconnu* (The unknown maroon), by Albert Mangonès. Malebranche taught at the Centre, as did Turnier. Malebranche was a student of Xavier Amiama (1910–69), a painter, originally from the Dominican Republic, who settled in Haiti in the mid-1930s.
- 11 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 96.
- 12 Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s That Center the Art of Black Women Artists,” in Jacqueline Bobo, ed., *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 146–72. Tesfagiorgis has noted on her faculty web page that “she [has] subsequently replaced Afrofemcentrism with Black feminism to expand the ideological and geographical limitations of the former.” Afrofemcentrism’s efficacy, for me, does not reside in a geographical specificity; rather, it is its epistemological capaciousness that renders it transformative.
- 13 Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of a Discourse,” 157.
- 14 Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of a Discourse,” 163. See also Judith Wilson, “Hagar’s Daughters: Social History, Cultural Heritage, and Afro-U.S. Women’s Art,” in Jontyle Theresa Robinson, ed., *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996), 95–112; Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” *Afterimage* 20 (Summer 1992), [http://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady\\_Olympias-Maid-Reclaiming-Black-Female-Subjectivity.pdf](http://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady_Olympias-Maid-Reclaiming-Black-Female-Subjectivity.pdf); Michele Wallace, “Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture,” in Russell Ferguson et al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 39–50; Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists” (1990), in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010), 174–86; Lowery Stokes Sims, “African American Women Artists: Into the Twenty-First Century,” in Robinson, *Bearing Witness*, 83–94; Huey Copeland, “Making Black Feminist Art Histories,” *American Art* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 27–29; and Copeland, “In the Wake of the Negress,” in Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz, eds., *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 480–97.
- 15 Gina Athena Ulysse, “Why Ransanblaj, Why Now? New Salutations to the Four Cardinal Points in Haitian Studies,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 23, no. 2 (2017): 70.
- 16 Turnier took composition and design classes from painter Geo Remponeau, oil painting classes with Tamara Baussan, and design classes with sculptor Albert Mangonès. Cuban artists Wifredo Lam, Cundo Bermúdez, Roberto Diago, and Carlos Enríquez also visited Haiti. Enríquez taught and had several exhibitions at the Centre. He was instrumental in sparking the interest of Maurice Borno and Turnier in the fundamentals of cubism and expressionism.
- 17 Cortor taught at the Centre from 1949 to 1951. The May 1949 Art Students League newsletter reports, “Luce Turnier, of Haiti, who has been studying at the League since October on a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation has been invited to Yaddo summer camp at Saratoga Springs. Her original grant of six months was extended by the Foundation from April to October, 1919, after which she will return to her teaching position at Puerto Prince [sic].” The December 1949 Art Students League newsletter reports, “Jason Lesley [sic], member, is on his way to Paris to study on a Fullbright grant. He has been teaching sculpture at the Centre d’Art in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where he reports that Luce Turnier has returned to resume her teaching post after spending last year at the League on a Rockefeller grant.” Art Students League Archives.
- 18 The sculptor Augusta Savage also studied at the Académie during her scholarship years in Paris from 1929 to 1931, as did the African American painter Laura Wheeler Waring, first in 1914 and later in 1924–25.
- 19 Salah Hassan, “African Modernism: Beyond Alternative Modernities Discourse,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 457.

- 20 There are conflicting dates as to when Turnier returned to Haiti from Paris (Champigny-sur-Marne). In an email exchange dated 21 January 2024, the art historian Gérald Alexis notes that he first met Turnier in 1977, when she had just returned to Haiti. Artist and art historian Lindsay Twa writes in her essay “The Rockefeller Foundation and Haitian Artists” that Turnier returned in 1972, and in the 1983 interview with Danny Pietrodangelo, Turnier nods in the affirmative when he asserts that she returned to Haiti from France in 1977 (0:05). Most recently, in a 5 June 2024 interview, Turnier’s daughter claimed that her mother would not have returned prior to 1971, after the death of François Duvalier.
- 21 Marie José N’Zengou-Tayo, “Fanm Se Poto Mitan: Haitian Woman, the Pillar of Society,” *Feminist Review* 59, no. 1 (1998): 138, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1080/014177898339497>.
- 22 John O’Malley Burns, personal communication, 28 April 2024. Anne Kennedy was John O’Malley Burns’s grandmother. Burns noted that this would be DeWitt Peters’s house in Turgeau, a neighborhood in Port-au-Prince. In her essay, Twa highlights the emotional and financial support that John Marshall, associate director of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Humanities Division, provided Turnier. In their letter exchanges, he often expressed his pleasure at her accomplishments. See Twa, “The Rockefeller Foundation and Haitian Artists,” 54–55.
- 23 In a 3 January 2024 email exchange, Gérald Alexis writes that “she was not concerned by identity issues, nor was she concerned with issues of race or gender. She only wanted to make figurative or abstract works consistent with her aesthetic concerns. If she had more female models, it was because men, less patient, could not remain quiet for long. She did, however, make a few portraits of men.”
- 24 While in Paris, Turnier mainly produced collages created through her presentation of abstract patterns, forms, and color. This essay explores only one part of her oeuvre: a select number of her paintings and drawings.
- 25 “Luce Turnier,” interview footage shot on location in Port-au-Prince by Donato “Danny” Pietrodangelo (1983), Pietrodangelo Production Group Inc. (formerly D&L Communications), 1983, 11:00–11:23. Pietrodangelo published an essay in which he provides an intimate portrayal of Turnier’s life in Haiti at the formation of the Centre and her artistic philosophy. See Donato Pietrodangelo, “A Haitian Original,” *Américas* 37 (September–October 1985): 39–41. *Américas* was the “official publication of the Organization of American States.” It is no longer being published.
- 26 In an 8 July 2024 conversation, Turnier’s youngest daughter mentioned that her mother loved to draw pregnant women because “she loved the roundness of their bodies.”
- 27 Hazel Carby, foreword to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 20th anniversary ed. (Boston: Beacon, 2015), xiii.

# Lindsay J. Twa

Meeting Modernism:  
Rose-Marie Desruisseau,  
Loïs Jones Pierre-Noël, and  
Haitian Modernist Painting

**LINDSAY J. TWA** is Professor of Art and Chair of the Humanities Division at Augustana University (Sioux Falls, SD, USA). She is also the Director of the Eide/Dalrymple Gallery at Augustana, where she has curated nearly one hundred thirty exhibitions. Her research focuses on Black Diasporan and African-American art and its transnational exchanges. Her work has been published by Routledge, Bloomsbury Academic, and Ashgate, including the book *Visualizing Haiti in U.S. Culture, 1910-1950*. She has had articles appear in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, *Journal of Haitian Studies*, *World Art* (Thames & Hudson), and *American Art* (Smithsonian), amongst other publications. She holds a BA in studio art and music from Concordia College (Moorhead, MN), and a MA and Ph.D. in art history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



This essay studies the career of Rose-Marie Desruiſseau (1933–88) to illuminate mid-twentieth-century networks of professional and interpersonal connections that built a space for women artists to contribute to modernism in the Caribbean. I will examine not only Desruiſseau’s training and Vodou-inspired painting but also her collaborative relationship with African American painter, researcher, and curator Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël (1905–98). Desruiſseau was a leading Haitian modernist painter with numerous exhibitions and accolades over her four-decade career, which was cut short by cancer. She was one of the first visual artists to devote herself to the ethnographic study of Vodou, Haiti’s complex African-rooted religion. Going beyond the stereotypes that dominated its representation, Desruiſseau used Vodou as a structure through which to examine the Caribbean’s engagement with modernism. Despite her accomplishments, and although she is often briefly referenced and praised in surveys of Haitian art, her life and work have not received extended analysis. At best she is used as a footnote to twentieth-century modernism in Haiti, and at worst she is disappeared altogether. Desruiſseau’s absence in scholarship is an example of a repeating pattern in the treatment of numerous women who significantly contributed to twentieth-century modernism, and yet are made invisible in accountings of that history.<sup>1</sup>

Desruiſseau’s captivating work demands attentive engagement, and her life serves as an important case study for exploring the artistic networks and infrastructures of Caribbean modernism. Rather than focusing solely on the what and when of Caribbean modernism, I am interested in examining the *how*. While the narrative of “high” modernism often centers on avant-garde figures challenging artistic traditions, it is essential to acknowledge the art-world infrastructures and networks that facilitated their recognition—ones whose asymmetries of power primarily benefited cisgender European or Euro-American white males. Artists are world makers and producers of knowledge. Their documented lives and work are data points whose presence or absence has the power to shift not only our interpretive results but also our theoretical frameworks and the nature of the questions that we ask. Therefore,

making a significant artist like Desruiſseau more visible illuminates the extensive network of individuals, institutions, and infrastructures that contributed to a distinctly Haitian modern art world. As a woman in the Caribbean, the very act of dedicating a lifetime to making her work becomes a critical and even political statement.<sup>2</sup>

### **Desruiſseau and the Art World of Port-au-Prince**

Rose-Marie Desruiſseau dared to live as a Haitian woman with a vanguard art practice. She began attending Saturday art classes at the Centre d’Art in 1948, when she was fifteen years old. The Centre d’Art was the beating heart of Port-au-Prince’s burgeoning art scene. Founded in 1944, it included studios, education and exhibition spaces, and was a key meeting place for artists, intellectuals, curators, and collectors from around the world.<sup>3</sup> Her earliest classes were with Lucien Price (1883–1964), a founding member of the Centre and one of the earliest abstractionists in the Caribbean. Price had lived in France from 1933 to 1934, witnessing firsthand the diversity of vanguard art produced in the international meeting ground that was the “School of Paris” during this period.<sup>4</sup>

Selden Rodman’s book *Renaissance in Haiti* (1948) includes an image of Price and a reproduction of his *Chant d’Afrique No. 1* (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> The nonobjective work emphasizes line and yet organizes itself into a figure-ground relationship of two vertical masses that are connected by three horizontal areas composed of rhythmic and undulating lines, punctuated by more solid shapes. Given its leading title, the viewer might see invocations of both musical notation and African-derived forms broken apart and reassembled in a cubistic manner. Inspired by African textiles, Price’s abstractions are part of Haiti’s Indigenous movement, which revalorized African-inspired forms not just for modernist innovation but also as a protest against Haiti’s history of colonialism and neocolonialism.<sup>6</sup> In his teaching, however, Price was not overt in this stance. Marie-José Nadal-Gardère (1931–2020), another young student during the Centre’s early years, and later celebrated as a leading woman artist, praised Lucien Price

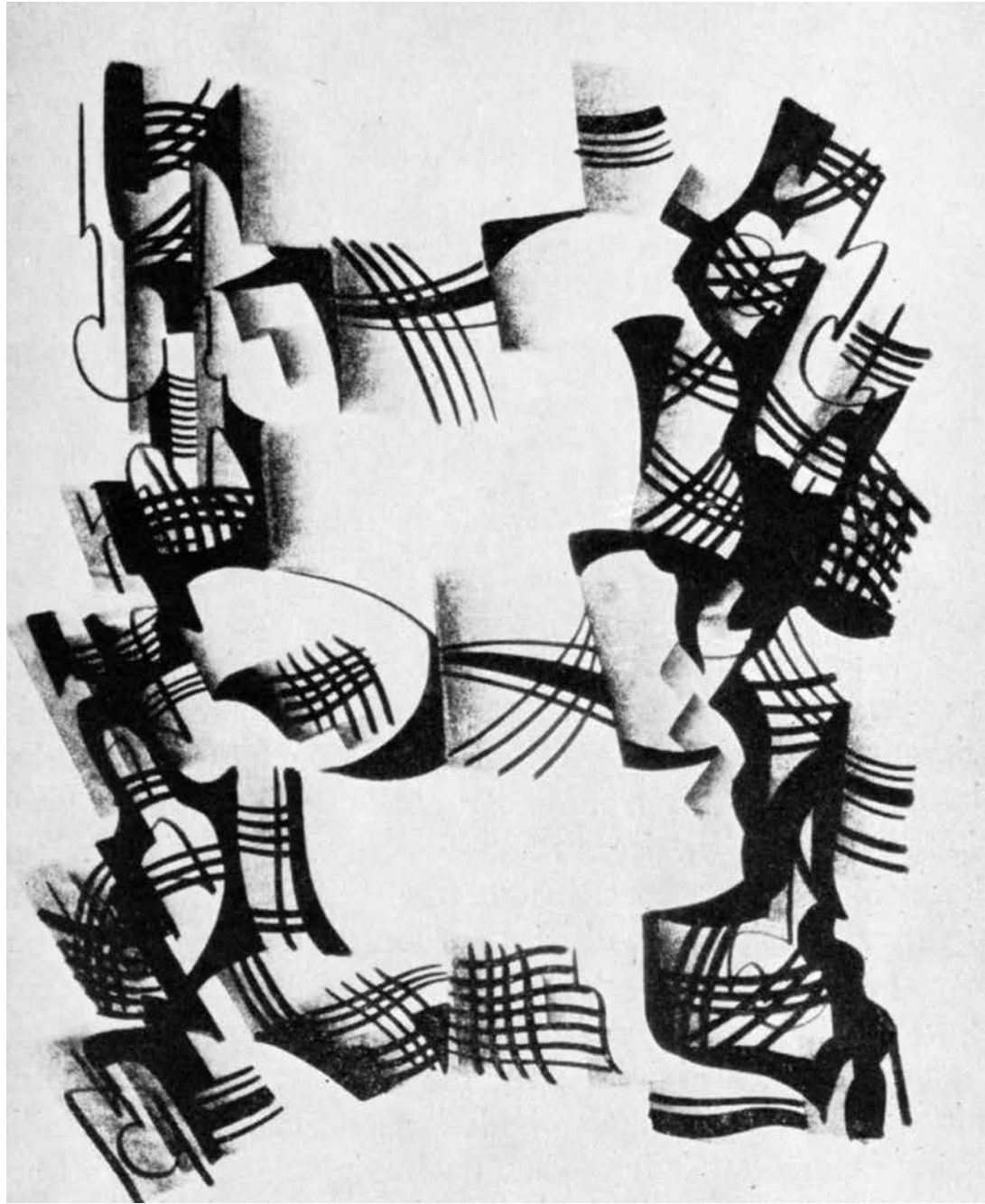


Figure 1. Lucien Price (1915–63), *Chant d'Afrique No. 1*, n.d.; dimensions and location unknown. Reproduced in Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), 90

for teaching the formal language of art. As she noted, he inculcated “the love of ‘stroke,’ ‘abstraction,’ and ‘rhythm’” and “initiated me into the mysterious relationships between light and shadow.”<sup>7</sup> Artists associated with the Centre d’Art represented a wide range of styles and subject matter. Within the language of abstraction, there was room for individuality and experimentation. Price’s students learned the grammar of modernist visual art without being bound to imitate him.

As a student and early in her career as an artist, Desruisseau used still life and figurative subjects to develop her visual skills. Formally, she gravitated toward abstraction, with an economy of composition and a breaking of form that nonetheless retained some representational elements. *Artist in the Studio* (1952) is a rare early example, showing Desruisseau’s exploration of interlocking forms that convey energy and movement (fig. 2). Through echoing geometric shapes—such as the window frame to the chairback; the color palette to the artist’s lap; and the negative space of the floor—we see an artist gaining confidence in conveying the essence of her subject through an economy of means and a formal interest in movement within repetition.

That Desruisseau gravitated to abstraction for her artmaking inserts her into a particular context of midcentury Haitian art-world infrastructures. While Haiti had a long-standing tradition of visual art, the opening of the Centre d’Art in 1944 marked a significant tipping point. This institution, with its gallery, classrooms, studios, and gathering spaces, catalyzed exponential growth in new infrastructures supporting the arts. This led to a surge not only in art makers but also in those invested in teaching and promoting art. This, in turn, allowed for the establishment of further institutions like galleries, museums, community groups, and art schools (informal and formal). In just a few years, Haiti emerged as a hub of artistic activity in the Caribbean, with its art gaining international acclaim, notably at the UNESCO exhibition



Figure 2. Rose-Marie Desruisseau, *Artist in the Studio*, 1952; gouache on paper, 18¼ × 18 in. framed. Image courtesy of the University of North Dakota. Purchased with funds from the Myers Foundations

in Paris in 1947. Moreover, the Centre d'Art served as a vital meeting place of people from widely different economic and social backgrounds.<sup>8</sup>

This moment of extreme growth had the potential for great cultural and social plasticity in its world making. Problematic structures of class, caste, race, and gender, however, were still present. The most often-cited example was the classification of the artists associated with the Centre d'Art into two distinct groups: the first were self-taught artists, referred to as “popular,” “naive,” “primitive,” or more recently, “Kreyòl”; while the second group included formally trained artists labeled variously as “nonprimitives,” “advanced,” “modern,” or “sophisticates.” The division embodied not just levels of training (or the purported absence thereof) but also a separation of styles. “Popular” painters employed representation without aiming for highly naturalistic depictions or the illusion of three-dimensional space through techniques like linear perspective or color modeling. In contrast, “nonprimitives” were trained in traditional academic art methods but also embraced, not incongruously, abstraction, particularly cubism’s fragmentation of forms and challenge to linear perspective through multiple viewpoints. These classifications also broke along lines of class and caste. Artists who had more formal art training tended to be from more economically privileged backgrounds, whereas the “popular” artists were most often from rural and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> This bifurcating taxonomy and its “term warfare” obscured the diversity within each group and the stylistic overlaps between them.<sup>10</sup>

The rhetoric surrounding the “popular” artists, often problematically labeled as “primitives,” depicts them as having a pure, spontaneously rooted vision that emerged joyfully with minimal encouragement.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the “nonprimitives” were portrayed as forsaking their Haitian essence in order to struggle through imitations of European trends. This taxonomy was rooted in primitivism’s ideologies—a major stream within modernism that sought to revitalize the seeming dead-end of the urban, overdeveloped “West” by seeking inspiration



from cultures deemed to be exotic, relegated to the past, and/or simpler.<sup>12</sup> The peasantry, those who were untutored, or with closer ties to national folk cultures were the antidote to the straitjacket of Western civilization. Such discourses were tied to a global art landscape that was also focused on identifying national schools and lauding those in the vanguard.<sup>13</sup> Selden Rodman's highly influential writings on Haitian art are deeply imbued with this discourse. For Rodman, that Lucien Price was an "extremely sensitive aristocrat" educated in France explained why his works labored within a language of modernism but had not yet arrived at something innovative or authentically Haitian.<sup>14</sup> Rodman found similar issues with the Centre's other leading abstractionists: Maurice Borno (1917–55) and Luce Turnier (1924–94), whose work seemed suspect both for their elite backgrounds and their training in academic art. Rodman cites the "unfortunate consequences" of the Centre d'Art's early hosting of a large exhibition of contemporary Cuban painting. The "impressionable Haitian artists" were "uncritically impressed," noted Rodman, who explained that "an art partly indigenous to an alien Hispanic culture was bound to produce conflicting results when applied to the Haitian scene. . . . the pervasive influence of Picasso's style which has affected all of Western painting for a generation and literally dominated the Cuban school, came to the educated Haitians without any historical preparation, and in the baneful second-hand guise of mannerism."<sup>15</sup> The intersections of subject matter and style in congruence with the artist's identity dominates evaluations of the art produced by Haitian artists at this mid-twentieth-century moment. That it needed to be original *and* embody a readily authentic *Haitian-ness* was—and often still continues to be—the litmus test by which the quality of a Haitian artist's work is judged.

This was the complex environment that Desruisseau faced when she arrived at the Centre d'Art in 1948, and it was shaped not only by class but also by gendered societal expectations. The lists of *naïf* artists rarely include women, who do appear as part of the "nonprimitive" group of artists, though in limited numbers. Basic drawing classes were a part of the

traditional curriculum for those who could afford formal schooling in Haiti. Luce Turnier, who is lauded in art history as the leading twentieth-century Haitian woman artist, had art classes as a child at her private school in Jacmel.<sup>16</sup> Families with the means might have been happy to enroll their daughters in the Centre d'Art's formal art classes for after-school enrichment but would not have approved of unstructured interactions; although the Centre d'Art was indeed the "meeting place for all the great talents of the country," it was viewed as a fraught space for young women. Gérald Alexis has noted that it "had bad press at the time and women at the institution saw their reputations sullied by the simple fact that they wanted a career in a male environment," and in which the men were of dubious morality.<sup>17</sup> Women, therefore, were almost always set on the path of more art training, which placed them in the category of "nonprimitive" artist, the least promoted and valued. At the same time, they faced immense pressure to not make art their vocation.<sup>18</sup>

Such structures meant that very few women persisted to become recognized arts professionals. This certainly could have been Desruisseau's story. Yielding to family pressure, Desruisseau trained in secretarial work and took a job in administration following her secondary studies. Biographies of Desruisseau often note a decade-long break from art, though her 1952 *Artist in the Studio* suggests that she continued painting despite not being able to devote herself fully to her work.<sup>19</sup> Around 1958, however, she enrolled at the recently formed Académie des Beaux-Arts d'Haïti to make art her full-time vocation. She studied under the direction of Amerigo Montagutelli (1899–?), and Georges "Geo" Remponeau (1916–2012), the latter had been a founding member of the Centre d'Art.<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy that Desruisseau resumed her studies under Remponeau, a prominent "nonprimitive" known for teaching formal art classes and supporting women modernists like Luce Turnier.<sup>21</sup>

Desruisseau supplemented her formal studies by frequenting art spaces and meeting artists in Port-au-Prince during her free time, including the Foyer des Arts Plastiques, the Galérie



Brochette, and the “Calfou” circle. These venues were known for their focus on modernist visual styles and their opposition to the growing commercialization of Haitian naïf art. Indeed, the Foyer des Arts Plastiques had been established in 1950 by artists (including Price and Turnier) who broke with the Centre d’Art for its privileging of the naïf painters. They argued for formal academic training for all Haitian artists in order to professionalize their work and be a “bridge between the primitive experiences . . . and new forms of expression.”<sup>22</sup> Galerie Brochette, in turn, served as a refuge from the tourist market, emphasizing art of substance beyond commercial exoticism.<sup>23</sup> Desruisseau exhibited alongside the Brochette-affiliated artists, including Luckner Lazard, Dieudonné Cédor, Denis Emile, Néhemy Jean, Tiga, and Antonio Joseph.<sup>24</sup>

After completing her studies at the Beaux-Arts d’Haïti as its first female graduate, Desruisseau expanded her artistic circle by collaborating with Pétion Savain (1906–73), known as the “father of Haitian contemporary painting.”<sup>25</sup> Inspired by African American artist William Edouard Scott (1884–1964), who had visited Haiti in 1930, Savain focused on plein air landscapes and genre scenes, capturing various Haitian types and valorizing the peasant and working class. This subject matter resonated with Haitian artists, writers, and intellectuals who aimed to create art that was both “modern” and rooted in “popular realities,” expressing opposition to historical oppression and the neocolonialism of the US occupation of Haiti.<sup>26</sup> While the nature of Desruisseau’s interaction with Savain remains unclear, Lionel Lerebours describes her as his “immediate collaborator.”<sup>27</sup>

Desruisseau’s artistic journey, spanning from her studies with Price and Remponeau to her collaborations with Lazard, Tiga, and Pétion Savain, positions her among Haiti’s leading painters who were dedicated to establishing professional art infrastructures. They aimed to cultivate an authentically Haitian artistic voice while embracing diverse visual styles that were rooted in formal training *and* modernist discourses. While Desruisseau deployed forms

of abstraction to engage with Haitian modern art, it was her diligent and focused studies of Haitian Vodou that helped her find both a mature personal style and a subject matter that proclaimed its identity as authentically Haitian. These works also enabled her to engage with modernism as a form of critique by challenging traditions.

### Desruisseau and Vodou



Figure 3. Rose-Marie Desruisseau, Still Life, 1965; oil on canvas, 20 × 24 in. Private collection. Image courtesy of the Chicago Gallery of Haitian Art

While Vodou would be a major source of inspiration, from the 1960s to the end of her life, her stylistic approach to the subject varied widely. The Chicago Gallery of Haitian Art's website features Desruisseau's *Still Life* (1965) (fig. 3).<sup>28</sup> Demarcated by strong contour lines, a table projects into the lower right corner and appears piled with various objects that occupy space uncertainly. Ceremonial implements in the foreground cast shadows and appear solid on the table, but as the eye moves from right to left and lower to upper, the relationship between foreground and background breaks down. A broad-brimmed straw hat provides an anchoring circle in the lower left and is a backdrop to the crutch that provides a dynamic angle moving toward the upper right corner. The lower part of the hat, however, refuses to remain in the middle ground: its lower brim becomes transparent as the pronounced brushwork overlies the front table edge. Desruisseau here is using a technique known as *passage*, breaking down illusionistic space by using visual disruptions that compress or circumvent what would make the viewer "read" the painting as a series of formal transitions from foreground to background. *Passage* and raking angles move the viewer around the composition. Echoing but without replicating the exact same pitch of the crutch, a pipe appears to be both touching the upward-tipped table and also floating free above it. Other lines and forms provide counterweights to the lean of the crutch, including the intricate white lines of a *vèvè*, the ceremonially drawn sacred symbol that identifies each *lwa*. Those familiar with Vodou would have readily identified not just the *vèvè* but also the crutch, pipe and hat as the identifiers of Papa Legba: the *lwa* of the crossroads, the guardian of the *poto mitan*, and the communicator between humans and the spirits. The painting is built of blues and reds, modified with warm earth tones, a color palette Desruisseau would continue to use for its symbolism in her Vodou-inspired art.<sup>29</sup>

Desruisseau's journey into Vodou subject matter was a result of deep study. She was born into an elite family, during an era of "antisuperstition" campaigns, so it would have been unlikely that she would have grown up as a vodouisante. Some biographies, however, work

to demonstrate that her class did not misalign with the devoted scholar of Vodou that she would become. Although she was born in Port-au-Prince, much of her childhood was spent in nearby Diquini, during the era prior to its expanded urbanization. Gérald Bloncourt highlights her upbringing "among simple people," indicating that, despite her elite background, her childhood grounded her in the folk culture of humble Haitians.<sup>30</sup>

During the opening years of the Centre d'Art, Vodou was not yet a prominent subject. The religion faced persecution, notably during the "de Rejée" campaign (1941–43), aimed at eradicating Vodou.<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, it was also during this era that Haitian intellectuals revalorized Vodou as a means to rally a national spirit in the face of the US occupation. Jean Price-Mars (1876–1969) organized an important conference on Haitian folklore in December 1920 that took seriously for the first time the subject of Vodou. He advocated that a systematic study of Haitian folklore, folkways, and the Vodou religion would create pride in an authentic, indigenous culture. His book *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (1928) is the lodestone for what became the Indigenist movement among the Haitian vanguard.<sup>32</sup>

Vodou became an important subject matter in Haitian painting also in part due to the early "discovery" and international fame of Hector Hyppolite (1894–1948). Hyppolite was not an *houngan* (Vodou priest) as many have claimed, but he was a visionary painter who included Vodou subject matter in his works.<sup>33</sup> Desruisseau, who began her studies at the Centre d'Art in the year of his death, stated in a 1984 interview for the Haitian press that she took inspiration in the "profoundly mystical aspect" of Hyppolite's paintings.<sup>34</sup> She also noted being impressed by Jacques-Enguerrand Gourgue (1930–96), a contemporary known for his surrealist naïf style, exemplified by his celebrated, Vodou-inspired work *The Magic Table* (1948), which was exhibited and acquired by New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1948, a milestone for Haitian art abroad.

Although Desruisseau invokes these well-known Haitian painters of Vodou in her interview with Pierre-Raymond Dumas for *Le Nouvelliste*, she emphasizes her own unique journey to the subject matter. Transitioning from the academic subjects imposed by her teachers, she describes finding inspiration first in books on Vodou mythology. A painter friend who shared them with her “encouraged me to complete a few images, to create a purely Haitian expression.”<sup>35</sup> She then began attending “a number of Vodou ceremonies.”<sup>36</sup> The literature on Haitian art privileges (purported) practitioners or those with familial links to practitioners, such as Hyppolite, Gourgue, and André Pierre (1914–2005). (Pierre is often said to be Hyppolite’s successor as one who paints the spirits.) Such associations were typically the domain of the naïf category of artists. Desruisseau was an academic artist and an ardent observer of Vodou ceremonies but never underwent initiation. According to Gérald Alexis, while some people believed that Desruisseau was blessed by the lwa and had the necessary attributes to become an initiate, she chose not to—Desruisseau felt that she would have been beholden to keeping certain aspects of Vodou secret and she did not want to be limited in what she could convey or express in her art.<sup>37</sup> Based on her direct experience and studies, Desruisseau is an expressive ethnographer who should be acknowledged alongside other famous avant-garde women who pursued Vodou in order to innovate their own creative disciplines: Katherine Dunham (dance), Maya Deren (film), and Zora Neale Hurston (literature).<sup>38</sup>

Desruisseau positions herself as a creative intermediary between the practiced and studied aspects of Vodou. It was not without struggle, and she is strategic in the ordering of this biographic information. Returning to the 1984 *Le Nouvelliste* interview, she moves from direct experiences, to looking at examples of paintings by her art-world peers, to broadening her studies in mysticism and the social sciences: “I then turned to mystical, ethnological, [and] scientific books, without ever forgetting Vodou.”<sup>39</sup> She describes compiling information, studying the colors, learning how the lwas are classified, and yet not finding a way to bridge this information to her technique. This creative impasse becomes an important twist

in her narrative: “I had to file my notes, close the books, and stop talking about Vodou. I set sail for the United States.”<sup>40</sup> She notes that she studied American painting in New York City, though she doesn’t detail which artists she saw or met. She also recalls that she shared her struggles with someone knowledgeable about mysticism and West Indian Vodou who suggested exploring Tarot cards for inspiration. Taking this advice, Desruisseau returned to Haiti with a deck, through which she achieved results: “The work began to manifest in my mind. It was marvelous. Four years later, around 1965, my exhibition series on Vodou was ready, it started with ‘Autour du Poteau Mitan.’”<sup>41</sup> What should we make of a Haitian artist, deeply embedded in the study of Vodou, who finds a breakthrough based on an encounter in New York City? Desruisseau succeeds in translating Vodou’s sensory experiences into her paintings while also disrupting the standard narratives of modernism’s artistic breakthroughs based on gender, race, nationality, travel, and primitivism.

In her 1965 painting, Desruisseau uses Papa Legba as the vehicle for a highly skilled modernist still life. And while the objects, lines, and symbolic colors become a representation of a greater spiritual world, the painting is still grounded in its ethnographic cataloguing of Papa Legba’s traditionally visualized attributes. Her compressing of the painting’s spatial planes through the technique of *passage* acts as a metaphor of the bridging of the worlds of human and spirits that is made possible through the Vodou ceremony, with its *vèvè* that invokes the god and invites him to be present. This is not a religious painting, but Desruisseau is beginning to explore the structures of Vodou rather than mere representations of it. And she was being particularly careful to enter the task of painting Vodou at a distance, without catering to the commercial tourist demand for exotic ceremonies.<sup>42</sup> Yet she also positions herself as an insider through study, observation, and openness to other mysticisms. The language of modernist abstraction becomes her vehicle for both capturing and collapsing distance.



*Still Life* exemplifies her mastery of a modernist visual vocabulary while claiming an authentically Haitian subject matter (fig. 3). This was only the beginning, as her style continued to shift with her exploration of Vodou's symbolic forms. *Offrande d'Agoue* [sic] (1972) is an example of her work at its most abstract (fig. 4). She continues with the symbolic palette of reds and blues, while space has become even more flattened. The blue ground features ribbon-like forms dominated by the star's points, balanced with a warm circle suggesting a setting or rising sun. It contrasts with waves, a red fish, fins, flags, and the encircling white bird, cock, and goat—offerings for the sea Iwa Agoué (Agwé). Instead of depicting a ceremony or Agoué's distinctive boat *vèvè*, Desruiſseau focuses on the dynamic energy of offerings, symbolizing their fragmentation, recombination, and, perhaps, acceptance by the sea. The painting evokes the gifts and hopes presented to the deity, protector of fishermen and sailors.



Figure 4. Rose-Marie Desruiſseau, *Offrande d'Agoue*, 1972; oil on canvas, 32 in. × 40 in. Location unknown. Listed as sold in exhibition brochure Howard University Gallery of Art Presents Paintings by Rose-Marie Desruiſseau of Haiti, Exhibition October 16–November 6, 1974

### Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël and Caribbean Women Artists

This painting caught the attention of Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, an artist, curator, and Howard University professor, who used it to illustrate two exhibition brochures. Jones Pierre-Noël was instrumental in bridging the art scenes of Haiti and the United States. She first visited Haiti in 1954, following her marriage to Haitian artist and graphic designer Louis



Vergniaud Pierre-Noël (1910–82). During that initial summer, Jones Pierre-Noël moved seamlessly between multiple institutions and art spaces, teaching at both the Centre d'Art and the Foyer des Arts Plastiques.<sup>43</sup> This allowed her to connect with numerous Haitian artists across diverse styles and subjects. Impressed by Haitian artists' talents, she made promoting contemporary Haitian art a focus of her curatorial and research endeavors.<sup>44</sup>

It was not until 1968, however, that Jones Pierre-Noël undertook a much more systematic study of Haitian contemporary art. This initiative stemmed from a crisis at Howard University, where student participants in the civil rights movement staged protests that nearly shut down the school. Within the art department, students rejected the Western art canon, demanding the teaching of “black art” exclusively.<sup>45</sup> Recognizing an opportunity in the crisis, Jones Pierre-Noël proposed a three-phase research project titled “The Black Visual Arts: Contemporary Afro-American and Contemporary African Art.” The project aimed to document contemporary Black artists in Haiti, Africa, and the United States. Jones Pierre-Noël began the first phase in Haiti during the summer of 1968.<sup>46</sup>

Jones Pierre-Noël approached her research from the perspective of an artist, emphasizing the importance of letting the artwork speak for itself by creating a visual archive documenting Black diasporic art practices. As art historian Rebecca VanDiver has argued, this approach aimed to “meet the student demand for exposure to black artistic production and provide an alternative mode of learning about black art—one that privileged the act of looking, rather than reading.”<sup>47</sup> Jones Pierre-Noël also approached her research from the point of view of an artist who often felt excluded by art-world structures. To get the work not just to a public but to the attention of the upper hierarchies of the art world—museums, prominent galleries, and critics and scholars—Jones Pierre-Noël understood that the foundational work of documenting biographical information and exhibition histories needed to be done. She meticulously archived her own career, ensuring her stature for future generations despite not

always receiving immediate recognition. Jones Pierre-Noël's archival activism extended to her research on Caribbean, African, and African American women artists.

Jones Pierre-Noël's scrapbooks feature clippings from the Haitian press, which eagerly covered her visit and research project. The press highlighted her role as a Howard University art professor and an internationally renowned artist—she had exhibited extensively in the United States and Paris. This emphasis assured readers that she had the expertise and reputation to assess Haitian contemporary art with authority. The press announced that Jones Pierre-Noël was a new voice for Haitian art who would give an update on its progress since the writings of Selden Rodman and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin. The press strongly encouraged all Haitian artists to assist her in this important research.<sup>48</sup> The press further stated that her research was inspiring because it would also provide further encouragement to Haiti's serious artists.<sup>49</sup> Such coverage underscored that the mere presence of a *serious* researcher could itself catalyze Haiti's contemporary art movement, at home and abroad.

Jones Pierre-Noël's funding report to Howard University highlights Haiti as a vibrant art center in the Caribbean. She intentionally overwhelms her readers with the sheer number of talented and engaged artists, and emphasizes that there is a diversity in styles and artistic goals. Rather than portraying artists as bifurcated into competing groups bounded by stylistic labels, she shows multiple groups with varied aesthetic goals at play. In this first summer of research, Jones Pierre-Noël produced more than 360 color slides, proudly reporting, “Howard University can now claim that it has the largest and most ‘up-to-date’ resource on *Art in Haiti* in the form of slides and biographical data.”<sup>50</sup>

Haitian women appear in Jones Pierre-Noël's records for this first research trip. Though Luce Turnier was then living in France, Jones includes her as “Haiti's outstanding woman artist,” the only woman to receive any commentary in Jones Pierre-Noël's brief report. Additional

women listed include Christiane Maturin, Marie Dennise [*sic*], Elzire Malbranche, Claude Maximilien, Florence Martinez, and Andrée Georges Naudé. Rose-Marie Desruisseau, however, is notably absent from Jones Pierre-Noël's reports and lecture materials during that academic year.<sup>51</sup> Jones Pierre-Noël expanded her research into Africa in 1970, further building her archive of biographies, exhibition histories, and slides. It was not until the 1970s, however, that she chose to focus her research specifically on women artists as a means to challenge the art world's discriminatory structures.

Linda Nochlin's landmark 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," not only argued for rediscovering overlooked women artists but also called attention to the systemic structures that marginalized them. Nochlin's article prompted a critical examination of gender bias within art institutions and exhibitions.<sup>52</sup> One major response was "The Conference of Women in the Visual Arts," held at the Corcoran Gallery in April 1972.<sup>53</sup> As one of the conference presenters, Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël was able to encounter other leading women, like Elaine de Kooning and Helen Frankenthaler. She was dismayed, however, by the lack of women of color represented at the conference and, probably more so, that the white women did not know anything about her and her prominent career. This experience highlighted Jones Pierre-Noël's intersectionality and seems to have spurred her to use her prestigious academic position, research practice, and transnational connections to work in a more focused way to challenge the art world's compounded barriers of race and gender. As such, she dedicated her next research phase to African American and Caribbean women. In the summer of 1973, Jones Pierre-Noël returned to Haiti and began conducting interviews and collecting biographies, exhibition materials, and slides of women artists. Her timing was opportune. The Centre d'Art had held its first official women's group show, *42 femmes peintres d'Haïti*, sponsored by the Women's Club of Port-au-Prince for International Women's Week, in February 1973. Although the exhibition was brief, its catalogue provided photographs and brief résumés of each exhibitor.<sup>54</sup> While this was the Centre d'Art's first women's

group exhibition, women had frequently been included in solo, duo, and group shows.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the Institut Français of Port-au-Prince had been hosting women's group shows since the 1960s. These events provided foundational information for Jones Pierre-Noël's research.

Jones Pierre-Noël aimed to rectify the exclusion of women artists from art history while also celebrating their diverse subjects and widely differentiated styles, including traditional naturalism, modernist abstraction, intuitive art, and art for political ends. (She called the latter artists who "fight with their brushes.")<sup>56</sup> After her experience at the Corcoran conference, Jones Pierre-Noël also prioritized dialogue alongside documentation, as can be seen in photographs of a luncheon for women artists that she hosted at a Port-au-Prince hotel during her summer research.<sup>57</sup> She also challenged women artists to take charge of curating their own exhibitions and to provide opportunities for each other, affirming a "new unity" to establish the importance of the "Woman Artist."<sup>58</sup> This was a call that she herself followed.

### **Desruisseau and Jones Pierre-Noël**

Desruisseau and Jones Pierre-Noël had likely met previously, given their involvement in the Port-au-Prince art scene, shared interest in avant-garde art styles, and fascination with Vodou.<sup>59</sup> However, their relationship became much closer in the 1970s, leading to correspondence and collaboration. Taking a keen interest in Desruisseau's work, Jones Pierre-Noël featured her in several curatorial projects. One significant outcome was the exhibition *Caribbean and Afro-American Women Artists* that Jones Pierre-Noël curated, which ran from 25 June to 15 July 1974 at the Acts of Art Gallery in New York City. The exhibition included ten African American and twenty-one Caribbean women. The exhibition's reach across the Caribbean was limited and was heavily focused on Haitian artists—not surprising given Jones Pierre-Noël's research interests and personal connections. The exhibition included one artist from Guyana (Doris Rogers), seven from Jamaica (Valerie Bloomfield, Gloria Es-

coffery, Edna Manley, Judy McMillan, Seya Parboosingh, Hope Parchment [Brooks], Heather Sutherland), and thirteen Haitian women: Tamara Baussan, Rose-Marie Desruisseau, Marie-José [Nadal-]Gardère, Édith Hollant, Gizou Lamothe, Elzire Malebranche, Michèle Manuel, Claude Maximilien, Gilda Thebaud Nassief, Andrée Georges Naudé, Micheline Prézeau, Maud Gerdes Robart, and Luce Turnier.<sup>60</sup> The exhibition brochure, mirroring the format of the *42 femmes peintres d'Haïti* exhibition, included headshots and brief biographies of each artist, sourced from Jones Pierre-Noël's research.<sup>61</sup>

The Acts of Art publication did not include a checklist of the exhibited artworks, but it did feature prominently Desruisseau's *Offrande d'Agoue* as the main illustration for the Haitian art.<sup>62</sup> Jones Pierre-Noël's interest in Desruisseau is unsurprising given their shared aesthetic goals: both artists aimed to blend academic naturalism with modernist abstraction to address Black diasporic realities. Moreover, Desruisseau already had an impressive exhibition history and a substantial body of work to showcase. In the prior decade, she had participated in numerous local and international group exhibitions. In 1973, she held a major solo exhibition of Vodou paintings, *Le vaudou haïtien I: Le poto mitan*, at the Société Dante Alighieri in the Italian Embassy in Port-au-Prince. Desruisseau's follow-up, *Le vaudou haïtien II: Libération*, ran as a solo exhibition at the Centre d'Art, 4–22 May 1974, just one month ahead of the *Caribbean and Afro-American Women Artists* exhibition. Jones Pierre-Noël not only curated the Acts of Art group show but also coordinated its promotion. She personally invited Haitian ambassador Gerard S. Bouchette, who agreed to attend the opening and promised to promote the show through the Haiti Government Tourist Bureau in New York. Her letter to the ambassador discusses possible promotion materials, requests that they “play up” Desruisseau, and includes four slides of Desruisseau's work from her research for promotional use.<sup>63</sup>

Jones Pierre-Noël also facilitated a major solo exhibition of Desruisseau's work, *Rose-Marie Desruisseau of Haiti*, at the Howard University Gallery of Art (16 October–6 November 1974). This solo exhibition included twenty-nine of Desruisseau's Vodou-inspired works. Jones Pierre-Noël wrote Desruisseau's biographical introduction for the Howard exhibition brochure and included a selection of quotations from Haitian newspaper reviews of Desruisseau's work. This established for the viewer Desruisseau's stature as a major artist with prominent exhibitions and accolades. Additionally, these quotes guide the viewer in how to engage with the Vodou-inspired paintings, as in the statement by Roger Gaillard, of *Le Nouveau Monde*, that “Desruisseau does not describe voodoo as a scientist but as an artist.”<sup>64</sup> This pushes the viewer past interpreting Desruisseau's paintings as merely ethnographic, and yet does not invite “black magic” stereotypes so common to American audiences.<sup>65</sup>

### Reaching an Audience

Since 1968, Jones Pierre-Noël had been working to diversify and complicate classifications of Haitian art. She also worked, through her writing, lectures, and her own painting, to engage with Vodou as a powerfully mystical religion. Her work evolved with her understanding to ultimately push back on exotifying stereotypes.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Desruisseau worked within and between the taxonomic binaries of Haitian modern art (naïf and “nonprimitive”) and of Vodou (as an ethnographic observer). She, too, understood that explanations of her work needed to retain Vodou's mysticism without exotification, but how she articulated this shifted over time and from audience to audience. We can see this in comparing interviews Desruisseau gave for the Haitian and American press.

For the opening of her Howard University solo exhibition, Desruisseau spoke with reporter Jacqueline Trescott of the *Washington Star-News*. Desruisseau chose her words carefully, with her limited English “translated by a friend,” likely Jones Pierre-Noël. Both women knew that this was an opportunity to build a more complicated understanding of not only Haiti's

religion but also of the role of women in creating advanced art. Although the article's title, "Capturing the Voodoo Mystery," would have caught the attention of the Washington, DC-area readership, Trescott begins by cautioning that the "substantive beliefs" of Vodou, a blend of African and Catholic faiths, have been "too often romanticized . . . misunderstood and maligned." Desruisseau, however, "peels away the veils of voodoo mystery in her art." Trescott praises her "strong paintings," noting further that they focus on the religion's concepts and its complex hierarchy of spirits and symbols. Despite emphasizing her understanding of Vodou, it is intriguing that Desruisseau does not seem to have mentioned her attendance at ceremonies, information that the interviewer would have been sure to have included. Rather, Trescott quotes the artist as saying that it was only in 1970 that she "began to make actual studies." Moreover, Desruisseau is quoted as saying, "Voodoo has to be given its validity before the concepts disappear."<sup>67</sup> This statement could easily be categorized as a form of "salvage ethnography" and contradicts, as discussed earlier, Desruisseau's 1984 interview with the Haitian press, where she describes beginning her Vodou studies in the early 1960s and mentions her attendance at ceremonies.<sup>68</sup> Desruisseau knew of the vibrancy of Vodou and did not seem to believe that it was in decline, and yet she made this statement. Desruisseau, with her interpreter (Jones Pierre-Noël), is constructing a different authoritative positionality to engage with her American audience. This is even more evident when the reporter asks about her influences. Desruisseau does not speak of the Vodou-inspired male Haitian naïf painters, Hyppolite or Gourgue, as she would note in her interviews with the Haitian press. Rather, she audaciously places herself within a canon of high European masters: "Michelangelo and Rubens for line. . . . And for color I studied Velasquez."<sup>69</sup>

Desruisseau also discussed her representations of women in her *Washington Star-News* interview. The Howard University exhibition included examples of both Desruisseau's more abstracted Vodou-inspired paintings and also the style she employed when she wanted to include both figures and dynamically fragmented space, such as in *Libération I* (fig. 5).<sup>70</sup> In

this painting, curves radiate outward from the drum head (around which Desruisseau's signature wraps). Fragmented planes suggest the drum's conical body and connect the figures into multicolored zones, still dominated by the interplay of blues and reds that was characteristic of her Vodou-based work. Hands and mallets both strike and float above the drum. A red-eyed figure could be the drummer, or something more, as its glance directs us out of the composition from the upper left corner. Floating faces close off the upper right and enforce the chant of the white-clad *hounsih* (a woman who has undergone initiation), whose textured paint reveals the blue-red underpainting. A hand that both floats free and relates to the *hounsih* holds the lit candle around which the painting's forms relate, the flickering light becoming geometric patterns. A figure wearing an intensely red headwrap anchors the lower left corner. Eyes downturned, contemplative or lost in the ceremony, this figure could be a self-portrait. The cover of the Howard University Art Gallery exhibition brochure includes a headshot of Desruisseau wearing a simple headwrap knotted at the nape of her head.<sup>71</sup> The *Washington Star-News* reporter asked specifically about the painting, *Hounsih Guede*, in which Desruisseau painted a woman to represent life and death. Desruisseau explained, "The woman is strong. Here, she is the breadwinner, the backbone of society. She is really the medium between good and evil, the beginning and end. And in the voodoo religion, there are more women than men."<sup>72</sup> This explanation parallels the women represented in *Libération I* and also Desruisseau's own experience as a professional female artist, one who had to be strong, who was central and present but in underacknowledged and unacknowledged ways.

Both Desruisseau and Jones Pierre-Noël confidently understood themselves to be central contributors to their respective art worlds. Yet as women, they had to constantly work against barriers that would render their work invisible. This was starkly evident in the 1978 major exhibition of Haitian art at the Brooklyn Museum. Of the 150 works displayed, not a





Figure 5. Rose-Marie Desruisseau, *Libération I*, 1974; oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in. (122 x 92 cm). Location unknown/undisclosed. Published as figure 34 in the posthumous exhibition catalogue *Rose-Marie Desruisseau, La rencontre des trois mondes* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1992), 76

single example was by a woman artist. In response, Jones Pierre-Noël penned an editorial that highlighted Luce Turnier, Rose-Marie Desruisseau, and Elzire Malebranche as examples of prominent women who had been overlooked. Despite her deep understanding of the women contributors to Haitian art, the influence of Jones Pierre-Noël's response was tempered because it appeared in a small-circulation regional publication, the *Haitian Art Newsletter*.<sup>73</sup>

This was also the fate of other aspects of Jones Pierre-Noël's research. She did not achieve her announced goal of publishing a book on Haitian art. When she did produce essays, they were often published in alternative venues to “mainstream” art-world periodicals—ones geared toward subspecialties, such as the *Haitian Art Newsletter*. Although these outlets engaged a passionate audience, their lack of prestige reduced the likelihood of being indexed and searchable, ultimately limiting the accessibility and reach of her research. Jones Pierre-Noël also embraced alternative means of distribution for her research images. She published a selection of biographies and slides of her “Caribbean and Afro-American Women Artists” research with the Budek Slide Corporation of Newport, Rhode Island. This company made the images and artist biographies available to museums and universities for incorporation into lectures and classroom curricula. These images are still viewable through major image databases, such as the University of Michigan Art, Architecture, and Engineering Library and ArtStor.org, including Desruisseau's *Offrande d'Agoue*. The images, however, are no longer linked to Jones Pierre-Noël's biographies, nor are the photographs credited to her.<sup>74</sup>

Jones Pierre-Noël wanted art to speak for itself, but she also understood that renown and stature in the global art world required accompanying texts: biographies, artist statements, exhibition records, and reviews. Such artifacts of merit have been much more difficult to come by, and less likely to be recorded and archived, for women, and particularly Caribbean women artists of this era. What happens when the image as a data point becomes separat-

ed from its artifacts of merit? The absence of accompanying artist information will more negatively impact a woman artist than a man, as can be seen with the fate of these published slides.<sup>75</sup>

Rose-Marie Desruiſseau was attuned to the structures of Vodou, both its history and practice. Her work voiced multiple meanings, refusing to divulge all its aspects in a cursory viewing. Simultaneously ethnographic and emotional, Desruiſseau’s representation of Vodou from within and without was world making in its sociocultural revelations. Art historian Gérald Alexis has discussed Desruiſseau’s body of work from her final fifteen years that intertwined the epic history of Haiti with Vodou themes. He notes that she went beyond mere illustration of historical facts, opting instead “to give a symbolic expression to the realities of her people.”<sup>76</sup> Her work was not merely illustrating what we might already know through texts and archives. To retell is to rethink accountings of that history and what has been left out.

Similarly, to attend to the greater complexities of an artist’s life and work is also to rethink our accounting of art history. This is demonstrated through how Rose-Marie Desruiſseau navigated art-world institutional spaces and her connections with Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël. Their collaboration illuminates, in the words of Carlos Garrido Castellano, a “locally driven process of research and networking involving artists, curators and cultural agents.”<sup>77</sup> Desruiſseau and Jones Pierre-Noël shared modernist aesthetic goals and the intersectional experiences of gender and race within the crossroads of Port-au-Prince and the greater art world. In mutual support, Jones Pierre-Noël included Desruiſseau in her ongoing research projects to document Black and Caribbean women and facilitated exhibitions of Desruiſseau’s work in the United States. They became collaborators working to shift and expand art-world paradigms that tried to make them invisible. To attend to their transnational relationship reveals how Desruiſseau and Jones Pierre-Noël created alternative infrastructures

that are a part of knowledge production in both text and visual form that is revealed when we look more closely at the archive they left behind.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Jerry Philogene's discussion of Luce Turnier in this issue.
- 2 Annalee Davis, Joscelyn Gardner, Erica Moiah James, and Jerry Philogene, "Introduction: Art as Caribbean Feminist Practice," *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): 35.
- 3 English-language narratives have privileged the role of American DeWitt Peters over that of Haitians in the founding and success of the Centre. See Marie-José Nadal-Gardère and Gérald Bloncourt, *La peinture haïtienne: Haitian Arts*, trans. Elizabeth Bell (Paris: Nathan, 1986), 22; Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, *Art in Latin America Today: Haiti*, trans. Eva Thoby-Marcelin (Washington, DC: Pan American Union, 1959), 7–10; Centre d'Art, "History and Archives," accessed 1 November 2023, <https://www.lecentredart.org/le-centre-dart/history-and-archives/?lang=en>; Luis M. Castañeda, "Island Culture Wars: Selden Rodman and Haiti," *Art Journal* (Fall 2014): 57.
- 4 Gérald Alexis, "The Caribbean in the Hour of Haiti," in *Art at the Crossroads of the World* (New York: Museo del Barrio and Yale University Press, 2012), 120.
- 5 In Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti: Popular Painters in the Black Republic* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948), the artwork is listed as collection of Selden Rodman. *Chant d'Afrique No. 1* may no longer be extant, as decades later a fire at Rodman's home destroyed much of his early collection of Haitian art.
- 6 Michel-Philippe Lerebours, "The Indigenist Revolt: Haitian Art, 1927–1944," trans. Gail Tuccillo, *Callaloo* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 711–25; Gérald Alexis, "L'abstraction dans l'art haïtien," *Conjonction*, no. 201 (1996): 50–53.
- 7 English translation from bilingual edition; Marie-José Nadal-Gardère, foreword to Nadal-Gardère and Bloncourt, *La peinture haïtienne*, 9.
- 8 See Gérald Alexis, *Peintres haïtiens / Haitian Painters*, trans. Marie Grocholska (Paris: Cercle d'Art, 2000); Alexis, "The Caribbean in the Hour of Haiti," 107–23; Carlo A. Célius, *Création plastique d'Haïti: Art et culture visuelle en colonie et postcolonie* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2023); Peter Haffner, "Tourism and Connoisseurship in the Collection Histories of Haitian Art in the United States," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, 27 July 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.389>.
- 9 Much scholarship has worked to unpack and challenge this discourse. See, for example, LeGrace Benson, "Modernity and Haitian Art: 'Modern' and 'Modernity' in the Art of Haiti," in *The Work of Philippe Dodard: The Idea of Modernity in Contemporary Haitian Art* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 2008), 151; Carlo A. Célius, "Afterword: Plastic Languages of Haiti and Postcolonial Perspectives: In Quest of Overtures," in *The Work of Philippe Dodard*, 186, 188; Gérald Alexis, *50 années de peinture en Haïti*, vol. 1, 1930–1980 (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1995), 13–70; Wendy Asquith, "Beyond Immobilised Identities: Haitian Art and Internationalism in the Mid-twentieth Century," in Alex Farquharson and Leah Gordon, eds., *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou* (Nottingham, UK: Nottingham Contemporary, 2012), 40–43.
- 10 Lynne Cooke, "Boundary Trouble: Navigating Margin and Mainstream," in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, exhibition catalogue (Washington, DC, and Chicago: National Gallery of Art with University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3. For a helpful summary of this history, see Haffner, "Tourism and Connoisseurship."
- 11 This narrative did not go uncontested. Observing the Centre's "popular" naïfs at work, Philippe Thoby-Marcelin argued, "I do not see what constitutes their 'spontaneity.' All of them . . . know very well what they are doing." Thoby-Marcelin, *Haiti*, 17. African American art historian and painter James Amos Porter made similar observations in 1946: Lindsay J. Twa, "La diaspora en dialogue: James A. Porter, Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, ou comment écrire l'histoire de l'art haïtien," *Gradhiva: Revue d'anthropologie et d'histoire des arts* (Musée du Quai Branly) 21 (February 2015): 57–58.
- 12 The scholarship critically examining primitivism is extensive, though much of it focuses on European artistic encounters with African and "tribal" arts as inspiration for modernistic innovation. Leon Wainwright, *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), provides an important Caribbean-focused window on this discussion.
- 13 See, for example, Serge Guilbaut, "Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick," *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 30–84.
- 14 Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti*, 91.
- 15 Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti*, 92. This was exhibition no. 6, *Les peintres modernes cubains* (1945). It was followed by a solo exhibition of Carlos Enriquez, exhibition no. 12, also in 1945. See <https://www.lecentredart.org/public-et-creation/ressources-sur-lart-haitien/liste-expo/>. Rodman lists Cuban artists Wifredo Lam, Louis Martínez-Pedro, Cundo Bermudes, and Roberto Diago as either having exhibited at the Centre or visiting to give lectures and demonstrations (92).
- 16 John Hewitt, "The Evolution of Luce Turnier," *Black Art: An International Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1978): 51.
- 17 "Elle aurait pu déjà penser à carrière de peintre, mais Le Centre, lieu de rencontre de tous les grands talents du pays, avait à l'époque mauvaise presse et les femmes, membres de cette institution, voyaient leur réputation souillée par le simple

- fait qu'elle voulaient faire carrière dans un milieu d'hommes, pas tous d'origine sociale 'acceptable,' des hommes surtout dont la 'moralité,' pour la bonne société d'alors, était douteuse"; Gérald Alexis, "L'humanité tout entière . . .," in Rose-Marie Desruisseau, *La rencontre des trois mondes*, exhibition catalogue (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1992), 10.
- 18 In a 1983 interview, Turnier reflected that although there were many women who came to the Centre during these early years, very few stayed in art: "You had to be tough to survive as a painter!" Luce Turnier, video interview by Danny Pietrodangelo, Port-au-Prince, 1983, published by Chicago Gallery of Haitian Art, 16 January 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-oQkQ-u5RK>.
- 19 Alexis, "L'humanité tout entière," 10.
- 20 Lerebours, "Indigenist Revolt," 711–25; Thoby-Marcelin, *Haiti*, 8–9.
- 21 Hewitt, "The Evolution of Luce Turnier," 48, 57.
- 22 Artist Dieudonne Cédor, quoted in Thoby-Marcelin, *Haiti*, 11–12.
- 23 Alexis, "L'humanité tout entière," 10. Here Alexis is citing the research of Lerebours.
- 24 Gérald Bloncourt, "Ma citadelle est construite de douleurs . . .," in Desruisseau, *La rencontre des trois mondes*, 82.
- 25 Betty La Duke, "Haitian Art: Five Women Painters," *Kalliope: A Journal of Women's Art* 6, no. 2 (1984): 15; Lionel Lerebours, "Rose-Marie Desruisseau, professeur à l'École Nationale des Arts," in Desruisseau, *La rencontre des trois mondes*, 84.
- 26 Lerebours, "The Indigenist Revolt," 713; Lindsay J. Twa, *Visualizing Haiti in U.S. Culture, 1910–1950* (London: Ashgate, 2014), 104–18, 229.
- 27 "Elle devint la collaboratrice immédiate"; Lerebours, "Rose-Marie Desruisseau, professeur à École Nationale des Arts," 84.
- 28 "Rose-Marie Desruisseau." Chicago Gallery of Haitian Art, accessed 15 January 2024, <https://www.chigoha.com/rose-marie-desruisseau?pgid=kswl3z4r1-cd1e9634-46c2-4e52-9ddf-d25e8657a8c7>.
- 29 The lwa are associated with their own sacred color(s): Agwé is blue and white, Ezili Dantò is blue, Ogou is red. Blue and red are also the colors of the national flag of Haiti, created by ripping the white from France's *tricolore*. In a letter to Jones Pierre-Noël, Desruisseau discussed exploring the Nago and Petro family of gods through "the violence of the colors red and blue" in the body of work for the exhibition *Le vaudou haïtien I: Le poto mitan*. Rose-Marie Desruisseau, Port-au-Prince, to Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël (20 March 1974), Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Smithsonian Archives of American Art (hereafter AAA), reel 4373.
- 30 "Son enfance à Diquin parmi les gens simples . . ." ; Nadal-Gardère and Bloncourt, *La peinture haïtienne*, 126; Bloncourt, "Ma citadelle est construite de douleurs," in Desruisseau, *La rencontre des trois mondes*, 82.
- 31 Alexis, *Peintres haïtiens*, 169. For a more extensive history, see Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- 32 Jean Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle / Ainsi parla l'oncle*, trans. Magdaline Shannon (Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1983), xi; Lerebours, "The Indigenist Revolt," 713; see also Magdaline Shannon, *Jean Price-Mars, the Haitian Elite and the American Occupation, 1915–1935* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996).
- 33 J. Michael Dash, "Hector Hyppolite." in Darby English and Charlotte Barat, eds., *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2019), <https://www.moma.org/artists/2790>.
- 34 "Les œuvres de Hector Hyppolite me révélaient, de leur côté, un aspect mystique profond"; Pierre-Raymond Dumas, "Interview: Vodou, Sex, and Death," *Le Nouvelliste*, 29 February 1984, reprinted in Desruisseau, *La rencontre des trois mondes*, 85.
- 35 "Un de mes amis peintres m'apporta des livres sur la mythologie vaudou (par les frères Marcelin). Il m'encouragea à en tirer quelques images, à créer une expression purement haïtienne"; Dumas, "Interview: Vodou, Sex, and Death."
- 36 "Puis je me mis en quête d'une documentation visuelle plus large, j'ai assisté à de nombreuses cérémonies vaudou"; Dumas, "Interview: Vodou, Sex, and Death."
- 37 Even so, as Alexis recalled, unidentified persons came to her exhibition opening at the Italian Embassy and slashed Desruisseau's Vodou-inspired paintings for "revealing too much." Desruisseau was traumatized by this event and left for Paris shortly after. Gérald Alexis, phone conversation with author, 8 May 2024.
- 38 Twa, *Visualizing Haiti*, 136–46; Kate Ramsey, "Melville Herskovits, Katherine Dunham, and the Politics of African Diasporic Dance Anthropology," in Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn, eds., *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture* (Banff, AB: Banff Centre Press, 2000), 196–216; Bill Nichols, ed., *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Karen Richman, "Innocent Imitations? Authenticity and Mimesis in Haitian Vodou Art, Tourism, and Anthropology," *Ethnohistory* 55, no. 2 (2008): 203–27; Kirsten Strom, "Reinventing Art and Ethnography: Hurston, Dunham and Deren in Haiti," *Review of International American Studies* 4, no. 2–3 (Fall/Winter 2009–10): 67–82.
- 39 "Après l'observation de certaines toiles haïtiennes, je me suis orientée donc vers des livres mystiques, ethnologiques, scientifiques, sans jamais oublier le vaudou"; Dumas, "Interview: Vodou, Sex, and Death," 85.

- 40 “J’ai dû classer mes notes, fermer les livres et ne plus parler du vaudou. J’ai mis les voiles pour les États-Unis”; Dumas, “Interview: Vodou, Sex, and Death,” 85.
- 41 “Je suis rentrée en Haïti avec un jeu de Tarot et le travail commença à se manifester dans mon esprit. C’était merveilleux. Quatre ans plus tard, vers 1965, ma série d’expositions sur le vaudou était prête, elle commença par ‘Autour du Poteau Mitan’”; Dumas, “Interview: Vodou, Sex, and Death,” 85. It is unclear if by “Around the Poteau Mitan” she is referencing an exhibition or a painting. If it is an exhibition, it would be *Le vaudou haïtien I: Le poteau mitan* (1973), a solo exhibition at the Société Dante Alighieri, Italian Embassy, Port-au-Prince. The year 1965 was a breakout one for Desruisseau and included the solo exhibition *Orientalism* at the Institut Français d’Haïti, Port-au-Prince, which mostly likely is indeed the first major exhibition of her Vodou work. Her participation in *13 femmes peintres* at the Institut Français (1964) is also notable for building her fame, and following these exhibitions she was selected to be one of the artists to represent Haiti at the Festival mondial des arts nègres (FESMAN: First World Festival of Negro Arts), held in Dakar, Senegal, 1–24 April 1966. That her résumé published in Desruisseau, *La rencontre des trois mondes*, 85, lists FESMAN as 1965 inserts a note of caution as to the accuracy and completeness of her published exhibition record.
- 42 Alexis, *Peintres haïtiens*, 212, 216.
- 43 Officially, Jones Pierre-Noël’s first visit to Haiti in 1954 was as a guest of the Haitian government to create paintings of the Haitian people. She taught at the Centre d’Art during the leave of absence of the American director DeWitt Peters. Such teaching appointments had become standard arrangements at the Centre, with many American artists teaching there, often in exchange for studio space. By the late 1950s, Jones Pierre-Noël began using Haitian subjects and stylistic forms as inspiration for abstraction. She established a studio in Haiti, where she would live and work during Howard University’s academic breaks. This further enabled her work to be in dialogue with Haitian art, where she found affinities in her own blending of naturalistic representations with abstraction, characteristic of the styles of both the *sophisticates* and the *naïf* artists. See Twa, “La diaspora en dialogue,” 59–64.
- 44 Her first of what would become many exhibitions was *Haitian Ceramics from Centre de Céramique, Port-au-Prince: And Paintings of Haiti by Loïs M. Jones* at the Howard University Art Gallery, 9 April–6 May 1966. The exhibition included the work of Jean Claude Garoute (Tiga) and sixteen other Haitian ceramicists, including Patrick Vilaire, Yolande Étienne, Wilfrid Austin (Frido), and Hilda Williams. This expansive exhibition included an astounding 400 works and was staged as a dual show with thirty-two oils and watercolor paintings of Haiti made by Jones Pierre-Noël. She was the chief organizer of the exhibition. Exhibition brochure, Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Manuscript Division, Howard University, Washington, DC (hereafter Howard).
- 45 Rebecca VanDiver, *Designing a New Tradition: Loïs Mailou Jones and the Aesthetics of Blackness* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2020), 153–54.
- 46 Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, “Art in Haiti,” typescript report to Howard University of 1968 research findings, Jones Papers, Howard.
- 47 VanDiver, *Designing a New Tradition*, 154.
- 48 “L’artiste Loïs John [sic] Pierre Noel,” *Le Nouvelliste* (29 and 30 July 1968). Newspaper clipping from Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, scrapbooks, reel 4373, AAA.
- 49 “L’art en Haïti et ses progrès: Interview de Mme Loïs Mallou [sic] Jones Pierre Noel recueillie par Maurice A. Lubin,” *Le Nouvelliste*, 16 and 17 September 1968, Jones Papers, AAA.
- 50 Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, “Art in Haiti,” undated typescript, but probably fall 1968, Jones Papers, Howard. Jones Pierre-Noël continued to add to the collection with subsequent research trips to Haiti and Africa, growing the visual library to over 1,000 slides that became a part of Howard University’s archives.
- 51 Jones Pierre-Noël, “Art in Haiti”; Jones Pierre-Noël, “Visual Black Arts, Howard University Research Project, Lecture no. I, Contemporary Haitian Artists,” Jones Papers, Howard.
- 52 Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” *Artnews* 69, no. 9 (January 1971): 22–39.
- 53 VanDiver, *Designing a Tradition*, 170–71.
- 54 Centre d’Art exhibition no. 153, on view 21–28 February 1973. The length and format of each of the forty-two artist entries varies widely, suggesting that each artist submitted their own information and that there was not a heavy intervention by a single editor to fact-check the entries and make them more uniform. Case in point, Desruisseau’s entry misspells her name and also lists her first teacher at the Centre d’Art as the deceased Haitian master Louis Brice. The copy of the catalogue retained in the Jones Papers, Howard, includes handwritten corrections for Desruisseau’s name. The error of Louis Brice for Lucien Price was not corrected and the error has been repeated in other sources. It is possible that Desruisseau submitted information that was misread when transcribed into the catalogue typescript or that she introduced the error herself by misremembering the name of the teacher of her youth.

- 55 The Centre d’Art began exhibitions the year of its founding, 1944. Andrée Malebranche, one of the Haitian cofounders of the Centre d’Art, had a solo exhibition in 1945, making her the first woman artist to do so. Malebranche would also have a retrospective in 1950. Luce Turnier was a very frequent exhibitor. Visiting women artists also were given shows, such as the American watercolorist Mary Coles. See “Exhibition list,” Le Centre d’Art, accessed 1 March 2024, <https://www.lecentredart.org/public-et-creation/ressources-sur-lart-haitien/liste-expo/>.
- 56 Jones Pierre-Noël, “Introduction: Caribbean and Afro-American Women Artists” (1973–74), i, Jones Papers, box 215-3, folder 5, Howard.
- 57 “Caribbean Women Artists at Lunch with Professor Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, Castle Haiti Hotel, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, July 1973.” Loïs Mailou Jones Papers, scrapbooks, reel 4373, AAA.
- 58 Jones Pierre-Noël, “Introduction: Caribbean and Afro-American Women Artists.”
- 59 Jones Pierre-Noël had turned to experimenting with collage, incorporating Haitian vèvès into her imagery. See Rebecca VanDiver, “The Diasporic Connotations of Collage: Loïs Mailou Jones in Haiti, 1954–1964,” *American Art* (Spring 2018): 24–51.
- 60 Many of the artists were not necessarily born in the Caribbean, and many had experiences abroad for studies and/or exhibitions. For Jones Pierre-Noël, this embodied the transnational dialogues that linked these women artists together. Edna Manley, for example, was born in England but became one of the most famous figures in Jamaican art history. Rose Amelia Auld, an artist born in Washington, DC, but who lived for many years in Jamaica, is also included in the exhibition and listed with the African American women.
- 61 *Caribbean and Afro-American Women Artists*, Acts of Art Gallery, 25 June–15 July 1974, exhibition brochure, Jones Papers, Howard.
- 62 Unfortunately, Desruisseau’s image was reversed in the publication. The brochure also included reproductions of work from Jamaican Gloria Escoffery and African American artists Star Bullock and Deillah Pierce.
- 63 Loïs Mailou Jones to M/Nigel (no last name), letter dated 5 June 1974, Jones Papers, reel 4577, AAA.
- 64 *Howard University Gallery of Art Presents Paintings by Rose-Marie Desruisseau of Haiti*, exhibition 16 October–6 November 1974, exhibition brochure, Jones Papers, box 215-25, folder 4, Howard.
- 65 Steven Gregory, “Voodoo, Ethnography, and the American Occupation of Haiti: William B. Seabrook’s *The Magic Island*,” in Christine Ward Gailey, ed., *Dialectical Anthropology* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 169–207; Lindsay J. Twa, “The Black Magic Island: The Artistic Journeys of Alexander King and Aaron Douglas from and to Haiti,” in Raphael Dalleo, ed., *Haiti and the Americas: Histories, Cultures, Imaginations* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 133–60.
- 66 VanDiver, “The Diasporic Connotations of Collage,” esp. 39–44.
- 67 All above quotes from Jacqueline Trescott, “Capturing the Voodoo Mystery,” *Washington Star-News*, 22 October 1974; news clipping from Jones Papers, Howard. The clipping includes the handwritten notation “Exhibition organized by Professor Loïs Jones Pierre-Noel.” Jones Pierre-Noël diligently collected and filed this clipping, further building the professional archive of herself (as curator) and Desruisseau (as artist).
- 68 Dumas, “Interview: Vodou, Sex, and Death,” 85.
- 69 Trescott, “Capturing the Voodoo Mystery.”
- 70 *Libération I* is part of Desruisseau’s series of history paintings exhibited posthumously as *La rencontre des trois mondes*, which she wanted to remain together. According to Gérard Alexis, the works were sold at auction and purchased together by a group of Haitian business people. The paintings were for a time displayed at a bank, the employer of one of the group. The paintings were removed from display and now are in storage. Phone conversation with author, 8 May 2024.
- 71 Viewable at Kessie Theliam-Charles, “Rose-Marie Desruisseau,” trans. Flora Hibberd, AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions, accessed 30 May 2024, <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/rose-marie-desruisseau/>.
- 72 Trescott, “Capturing the Voodoo Mystery.”
- 73 Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, “Brooklyn Museum Exhibit Overlooked Art of Haitian Women,” *Haitian Art Newsletter* (October–November 1978), Jones Papers, Howard.
- 74 “Howard University Research Project, SRP 646: Caribbean and Afro-American Women Artists (1973–1974) with slide index and photographs by Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël,” Jones Papers, Howard. Thumbnail drawings by Jones Pierre-Noël of the works she submitted as slides still exist in her archived papers, matching the images now published in online databases.



- 75 Although Jones amassed over 1,000 slides, a phenomenal accomplishment and a rich resource, VanDiver offers a sobering reflection: “Despite the new Afrocentric direction of the art department’s course offerings, the slides remain to this day almost untouched and sit in several uncatalogued boxes. The seeming lack of attention paid to Jones’s research slides both in the years immediately following their archival deposition and today, is telling. While Jones was in the middle of the black intellectual scene, she remains on the periphery. While her work is documented archivally, it remains under studied. Jones is, on the one hand, ‘in’ but, on the other, still ‘out.’” VanDiver, *Designing a Tradition*, 155.
- 76 Alexis, *Peintres haïtiens*, 56. Desruisseau is credited with being one of the first Haitian artists to produce a visual series on the epic history of Haiti and to have it exhibited collectively. *La rencontre des trois mondes* included thirty-four paintings and debuted posthumously in Paris for the 500th anniversary of the “discovery” of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1992. This exhibition also had an accompanying exhibition catalogue, making Desruisseau an early Haitian painter (and still one of the very few) to have an extended monograph. Desruisseau, *La rencontre des trois mondes*; [https://www.haiticulture.ch/Rose-Marie\\_Desruisseau.html](https://www.haiticulture.ch/Rose-Marie_Desruisseau.html).
- 77 Carlos Garrido Castellano, *Beyond Representation in Contemporary Caribbean Art: Space, Politics, and the Public Sphere* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 23.

# Carlos Garrido Castellano

Allora & Calzadilla and the  
Planetary Consequences  
and Afterlives of Modernism

**CARLOS GARRIDO CASTELLANO** is Associate Professor/Senior Lecturer at University College Cork, where he coordinates a BA programme in Portuguese Studies. He is also Senior Associate Researcher at the Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD), University of Johannesburg. He is the author of *Beyond Representation in Contemporary Caribbean Art* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* (SUNY Press, 2021) (which became a free open access publication in 2023), *Literary Fictions of the Contemporary Art System* (Routledge, 2023) and *Chorus: Sonic Politics of the Carnavalesque in Tragic Times* (forthcoming 2025), as well as of two other monographs in Spanish and one in Portuguese. He also edited *Curating and the Legacies of Colonialism in Contemporary Iberia*, *Decentering the Genealogies of Art Activism*, and *The Afterlives of Anticolonial Aesthetics*. He is also Principal Investigator of the IRC Laureate Consolidator Project “Assessing the Contemporary Art Novel in Spanish and Portuguese: Cultural Labour, Personal Identification and the Materialisation of Alternative Art Worlds” ARTFICTIONS, which makes available a budget of 595.000 euros to explore the consequences of radical forms of creativity for materialising alternative (art) worlds and will run from September 2023 to September 2027.

This article engages with the creative work of the duo of artists Jennifer Allora (b. 1974) and Guillermo Calzadilla (b. 1971), attempting to make sense of the consequences and afterlives of modernism, which is to say, with the ways modernist aesthetics shape our present. My main aim is to expand on debates on aesthetic modernism to address the implications of the modern and colonial project as a planetary endeavor, one that is not limited to human beings and one that affects (and is affected by) the ebbs and flows of finance and debt, and also by energy, multispecies displacements, and climate colonialism. This is particularly important nowadays, when the possibility of a generic crisis looms over and conditions our sociopolitical imagination at a planetary scale.<sup>1</sup>

Allora & Calzadilla are famous for bringing together research, social engagement, and artistic creativity to explore the spaces in between collective mobilization and the environment in projects such as *Under Discussion* (2006) or *Returning the Sound* (2004), which addressed the intertwined histories of imperialism and environmental degradation in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, while taking account of the transgressive responses produced by the collective mobilization of Puerto Ricans against the occupation and use of the island of Vieques as a site for military testing by the US Army.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I discuss two lesser-known pieces that problematize issues of center and peripherality within modernist aesthetics: *Puerto Rican Light*, an installation and minimalist sculpture first exhibited in 1998; and *Cadastre*, a mechanically produced “nonpainting” on linen created in 2019. My interest in these two artworks involves the ways they expand our understanding of modernity by emphasizing the fact that modernist aesthetics are central to debates on energy colonialism, extractivism, and the financialization of everything. These pieces demonstrate that the trajectory of modernism only makes sense at a planetary scale (instead of just a nation-based scale). The objective of the essay is not to provide a final interpretation that challenges the already rich and varied discussions of the work of Allora

& Calzadilla. I am far more interested in seeing what happens when we look at modernism through the lens of these two contemporary pieces, which are concerned with electricity, energy, and nonhuman forces, as well as with the genealogies of colonialism, radical thinking, political mobilization, and extractive reason. Not only do they challenge the idea of the Caribbean as a peripheral place with regards to modernist aesthetics; they also highlight the more-than-human consequences of modernity and movement.

Here, *Puerto Rican Light* and *Cadastre* have something in common: they establish a dialogue with the history of neo-avant-garde art and late modernism, a movement that emerged after World War II seeking to complicate the legacies and consequences of early twentieth-century avant-garde and modernist aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the historical avant-garde movements (these emerging in the first decades of the twentieth century) and the trends developed during the 1950s and 1960s has been subject of much discussion, and I will not pursue this question. I would just mention that the neo-avant-garde is particularly useful for understanding the collapse of revolutionary horizons and the evolution of the expectations of democratization and radicality attributed to modernist movements. In fact, the neo-avant-garde evolves by accompanying the development of what David Scott problematizes as tragic history and tragic times, that is, the rise and fall of world revolution, a history, therefore, that simply does not make sense outside of the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup> The relationship with the historical context of the neo-avant-garde was often concealed in a kind of art that sought an impersonal, universal aesthetics. By looking at work by Allora & Calzadilla that is rooted in Puerto Rico but nevertheless functions on a planetary scale, I believe that this history comes to the surface, illuminating not just the linkages between the past and the present (the role of modernism in shaping contemporary sociopolitical transformations) but also the consequences and potential futures resulting from modernist aesthetics and modernity in general.

## A Choreopolitics of Modernism

Before we start, a few considerations are in order. What does it mean to think Caribbean artistic practice while keeping in mind that “the problem of modernity is native to the Caribbean”?<sup>5</sup> How are we to engage with the locality of such a problem while remaining attentive to the displacements and dislocations resulting from the ebbs and flows of modern, colonial, capitalist, socialist projects, with the interlaced and partially coexisting past, present, and futures that shape Caribbean genealogies of cultural creativity?

Assuming that these questions are relevant in our times, and also that my approach to these questions arises from a specific positionality (that of a male, Southern European researcher working in a colonized and colonizing territory within Northern Europe, Éire/Ireland), I would like to answer this question by bringing together modernist aesthetics and movement.

It seems to me that debates on modernist aesthetics are caught in two major traps: one involves teleology, namely assuming that modernist projects end up generating predefined and/or predictable concatenations and linkages; and the other entails essentialism, that is, assuming that modernism is, or was, a stable thing, a geography even. The challenge would lie in thinking modernism beyond stable separations between centers and peripheries while remaining attentive to the diverse ways modernism projects itself into our present.

Following Peter Sloterdijk, André Lepecki has dedicated decades to thinking about the relationship between modernism and mobility.<sup>6</sup> For Lepecki, modernist aesthetics are strongly linked to the project of modernity, which in turn can be felt as ceaseless, choreographed moves. Modernity is not just a tendency toward movement; rather, both are each other’s conditions of possibility. Thus, we can talk about “the simultaneous invention of choreography and modernity as a ‘being-toward-movement.’”<sup>7</sup> This conceptualization is singular for many reasons: it relies on the confluence between ontology (being and being modern) and displacement. Ultimately, change and motility (something we can assume as unstable and subject to transformation) emerge as the defining elements of the modern subject. There-

fore, the ontological nature of modernism is for Lepecki essentially contradictory and problematic.

Being-toward-movement enacts a strange form of universalism, as it entails an aspirational force, a perfective, reiterative task, a process-based state that nevertheless achieves canonical status by virtue of its recognition as a universal and universalist tendency.

Choreography (literally writing/written dance, *choreos/graphos*) is exemplary, imitative, calling for a not-easy exercise of reconciling ontology, order, power, and interpellation. Being-toward-movement is subjective and ideological, looked for and imposed, and the trace of its expansion, its own choreograph, can be understood as the movement toward the universalism of modernism itself.

Being-toward-movement, Lepecki argues, should not be seen as a neutral force; rather, its purchase relies on its own ideological mobilization as the spectacle of modernity, as a spotlight that silences and makes all sorts of presences and displacements invisible and unthinkable.<sup>8</sup> Lepecki explains that “by constantly representing itself as a kinetic spectacle and disavowing its energetic lack of autonomy, modern subjectivity establishes its colonizing relation in regard to all sorts of energetic sources—whether those are natural, physiological resources, or affective ones: desires, affects, becomings.”<sup>9</sup> The answer that Lepecki provides to this totalizing, universalizing force is a movement toward choreopolitics, to a critical questioning of the manifold combinations between graphos and choreos as a political terrain. In the end, “the question is to know if and how the dominant moves. And to know when, what, and who is it that the dominant requires to be moving.”<sup>10</sup>

This essay engages with a couple of artworks that apparently rely on stillness and that seem to be refractory to movement. The thing is, however, that both *Puerto Rican Light* and *Cadastre* vibrate and pulsate in ways that resonate with Lepecki’s concern with the spec-



tacularization of movement as the basis of a celebratory, capitalist vision of modernity and movement. At the same time, my interpretation of both pieces by Allora & Calzadilla also departs from choreopolitics. I believe that Caribbean contemporary artistic practice enacts its own critical responses to being-toward-movement, either by highlighting the centrality of the region within the articulation of global exchanges; by critically questioning and reversing the exotification of the Caribbean landscape as a “paradisaal location” removed from the acceleration of these exchanges; and finally, by underscoring the importance of the Caribbean in shaping and expanding emancipatory agendas.

In other words, Caribbean artistic practice illuminates how logistics—the displacement of bodies, commodities, ideas at the center of racial capitalism and the modern and colonial project<sup>11</sup>—forces us to conceptualize ontology and motility from a rather different position than that of Sloterdijk. When we look at *Puerto Rican Light* and *Cadastre*, the question arises of what is at play when artistic objects, bodies, images, and ideas are moved from place to place, where the choreographed displacement of containers and contained beings replaces the agency-driven figures of the dancer and the choreographer.

Modernity is about being-toward-movement. Fair enough. But for many, that movement consisted of fleeing and coalescing, of fleeing and marooning. It is crucial, therefore, to understand that the connection between modernism and choreography cannot be understood without paying attention to these “centripetal,” “escapist” trajectories that have the Caribbean as their historical epicenter. So, modernism as choreographic kinetics cannot be understood outside of the Caribbean, and in the same way radical, subversive choreopolitics are indissolubly linked to the region. The first artwork we will look at, *Puerto Rican Light*, testifies eloquently to the impact of these subversive trajectories of flight and parading, of mo(ve)ments that do not fall under the calculations of economic optimization.

## Got Light? Energy, Debt, Mobilization

Dance requires energy, energy drives human motion but also the abstract, more-and-less-than-human forces of financial speculation. Energy powers the world, it is the reason behind being-toward-movement, but it is also the driving force of dehumanization, the force, at once invisible and hypervisible, making the world go round and debt and extraction start anew.

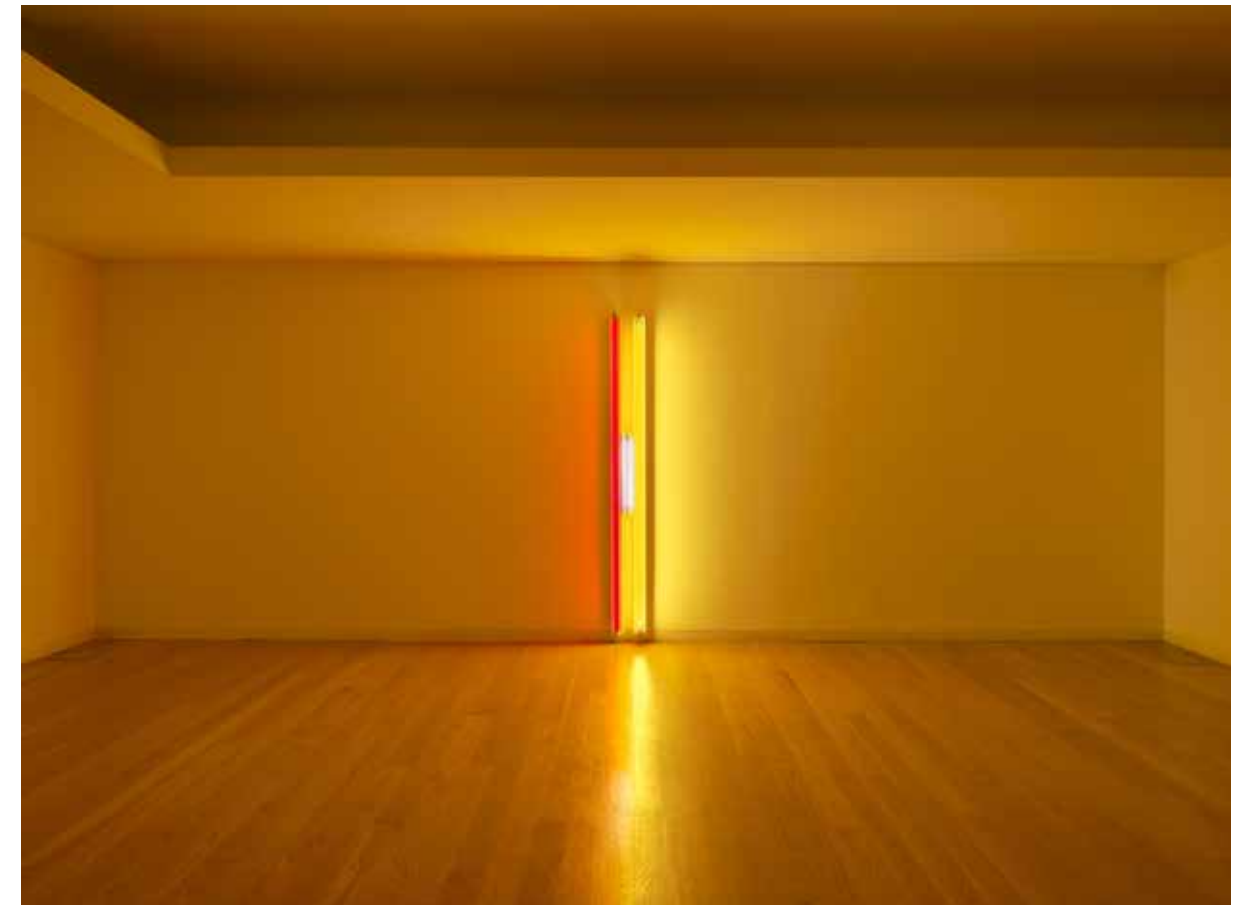


Figure 1. Puerto Rican Light. 2023. Dan Flavin, Puerto Rican Light (To Jeannie Blake), 1965, red, pink, and yellow fluorescent lights, 96 inches high: Solar powered batteries and inverter. Installation view. Museu Serralves, Portugal. Image courtesy of Museu Serralves.



Figure 2. Puerto Rican Light. 2023. Dan Flavin, Puerto Rican Light (To Jeannie Blake), 1965, red, pink, and yellow fluorescent lights, 96 inches high: Solar powered batteries and inverter. Installation view. Museu Serralves, Portugal. Image courtesy of Museu Serralves.

Energy colonialism situates modernism's emphasis on motility within a much-needed, expanded, more-than-human frame, one that particularly addresses us in the present moment. Modernism's motility should be seen as the preamble to the later stage of neoliberal capitalism known as neoliberalism; but neoliberalism and modernism should also be seen as planetary processes, as part of the project and process that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney called logistics. The history of contemporary Caribbean art can be read as a choreographed

mo(ve)ment, one that relies on the spectacularization of presence or absence existing through display, one, however, that fails to fully apprehend the many ways Caribbean creativity exists in and against motion.

A good case in point is *Puerto Rican Light*, a piece of minimalist art that directly engages with Dan Flavin's iconic *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeannie Blake) 2*, created in 1965. The latter work constitutes a landmark within US minimalist style and a decisive step toward the configuration of the artist's mature style in the mid- and late 1960s. *Puerto Rican Light* combines light and color in a simple, warm composition. The strategies adopted in this work remained iconic and defined Flavin's career from this moment on: the artist limited his palette to a few colors and kept the use of fluorescent tubes at the center of his work, thus establishing a dialogue with modernist aesthetics, in particular with the work of Constantin Brancusi and Vladimir Tatlin, of early modernism and constructivism.

Allora & Calzadilla's piece challenges and expands on Flavin's composition in subtle ways, by bringing into the gallery space the generator that makes the piece glow and by powering that generator with sunlight from Puerto Rico.<sup>12</sup> A key feature of minimal art (the use of fluorescent tubes and industrial, unspecific materials to emphasize reception and perception and to avoid overconditioning the aesthetic experience) is transformed by the Caribbean duo of artists into an inquiry into the regimes of energy, oil, and debt accumulation that recombine colonial hierarchies and dependences. By linking the apparently neutral and playful proposal made by Flavin's *Puerto Rican Light* to the ups and downs of global geopolitical and economic transformations taking place during the second half of the twentieth century, Allora & Calzadilla highlight that the debate on global modernism should take into consideration the intricacies of capitalism in the web of life, as Jason Moore puts it.<sup>13</sup> *Puerto Rican Light* demonstrates that issues of universalism and locality, autonomy and perception can be observed at a planetary scale; that aesthetic decisions are not exempt from the contra-

dictions surrounding the acceleration of capitalist logistics, the tyranny of “government by debt,” and extractive regimes.

Produced in the early 2000s, *Puerto Rican Light* playfully updates and reinterprets minimal art: in the duo’s installation, nothing happens (at least apparently) because nothing moves; and nothing moves because (apparently) nothing happens. The thing is, however, that this nothingness becomes the condition of possibility for the endless transfer and the uneven displacement of energy and value and financial speculation on the planetary scale. If minimal art enacts a process of artistic appreciation in which “the viewer, refused the safe, sovereign space of formal art, is cast back on the here and now,”<sup>14</sup> Allora & Calzadilla’s take on Flavin expands the openness and homelessness of modernist spectatorship by bringing together the production and circulation of art objects and the consequences of decades-old regimes of energy and debt accumulation and (uneven) distribution. *Puerto Rican Light*, therefore, illuminates the darker corners of global logistics, revealing how its “globality” is the result of choreographed, systematic, systematized extraction. At the same time, the work problematizes and updates two key pillars of modernist aesthetics: originality and autonomy.

It is worth reflecting here on the moment in which *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake) 2* was created. This sculpture, which attempted to produce a warm environment inside the “cold” and neutral dimension of the white cube, was created at the same time as global warming started to become a central concern. As oil economies were on the rise during the 1950s and 1960s, spectroscopy and carbon-14 analysis became common. The result was an acceleration (movement being at the core of modernism) and also a deeper awareness of the consequences of the exhausting movement of beings and objects, of global logistics, that would culminate decades later in what is called globalization. The 1960s are also a crucial moment to understand climate colonialism: as many countries around the world achieved independence, the expansion of consumerism and extraction generated a depen-

dency on producers and suppliers of energy and fossil fuel. The decade could be seen as the preamble for a clash between independence and anticolonial movements, on the one hand, and extractive neocolonial practices, on the other, that would continue for the rest of the century. In the case of Puerto Rico, these transformations were translated into the vanishing horizon of independence after the Luis Muñoz Marín government and the consequences of the bootstrap process, which attempted to industrialize the island and ultimately increased the Puerto Rican economy’s dependence on imported energy and oil. As we will see, all this context matters, and ultimately conditions, the viewer’s engagement with the apparently neutral atmospheric and light conditions created in *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake) 2*.

Minimal art sought to challenge the exceptionalism of the gallery space by reorienting the viewer toward the environment surrounding the artistic experience. Expanding on this, Allora & Calzadilla’s *Puerto Rican Light* nuances and expands this goal by acknowledging that such an “environment” cannot be detached from the tangible consequences of the expansion of capitalism at a planetary level. Light, energy, and warm temperature, therefore, should not be seen just as neutral, aesthetic elements mobilized as part of a piece of minimal art. The abstract nature of minimal art, which was oriented toward achieving communication besides linguistic and cultural conditioning elements, should therefore be seen as entangled into the transformation of capital and energy. In a similar way, the dematerialization of the work of art (the idea that minimal art is the preamble of conceptualism) acquires a different meaning when compared with the atmospheric transformations of “capitalism in the web of life” that will lead toward globalization and the collapse of revolutionary movements. By revealing the energy cost of keeping “the shock of the new” alive, Allora & Calzadilla provide an unexpected answer to a central question that Hal Foster asks in his revision of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde aesthetics, that of how to distinguish the old from the new, the conservative from the renovative.<sup>15</sup> The question should alert us to its topological



reductionism, its assumption that what moves always comes from the same place, the West (a Western geography from which the Caribbean is erased almost magically).

Allora & Calzadilla's installation reveals how the projection of a paradisaical image of the Caribbean within global modernist aesthetics is the condition of possibility of energy colonialism, what makes energy-as-debt possible, thus pointing at a double exclusion: from the debates on global modernism (despite the gesture of pointing at the "exceptionality" of Puerto Rican

light) and from politics and sovereignty. **Puerto Rican Light** expands and nuances the capacity of minimal art to raise phenomenological awareness of the artwork's environment by pointing at the uneven socioeconomic relations that made global modernism possible. It is important to note that the work, which was first displayed in 2003, has been redisplayed several times and adapted to different locations (including Cueva Vientos, a limestone cave located in the southernmost part of the island) and always in relation to issues of energy shortages and debt colonialism.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 3. Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos) 2015. Dan Flavin, Puerto Rican Light (To Jeannie Blake), 1965, red, pink, and yellow fluorescent lights, 96 inches high: Solar powered batteries and inverter. Installation view; El Convent natural protected area, Guayanilla-Penuelas, Puerto Rico. Commissioned by Dia Art Foundation, New York. Image courtesy of Allora & Calzadilla



Figure 4. Puerto Rican Light (Cueva Vientos) 2015. Dan Flavin, Puerto Rican Light (To Jeannie Blake), 1965, red, pink, and yellow fluorescent lights, 96 inches high: Solar powered batteries and inverter. Installation view; El Convent natural protected area, Guayanilla-Penuelas, Puerto Rico. Commissioned by Dia Art Foundation, New York. Image courtesy of Allora & Calzadilla



The second issue at play in this piece is autonomy. If minimalism questioned the ideology of the gallery space, it also reproduced a narrow definition of individual authorship, one based on the creative genius of a few white, middle-class, and Western creators, forcing all other work to be derivative, to “catch up.” We can see how *Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake) 2* attempts to make the spectator aware of their perception and orientation by bringing the “warm” Caribbean light into the neutral and cold white cube. For Flavin, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean represent just “flavor,” color. At the center of this experiment, as well as of much minimal art, is phenomenology’s emphasis on experience and perception: the minimal work of art fulfills the role of dismantling the illusion of the neutrality of the gallery space, highlighting its situatedness and constructed character. At the same time, however, such an exercise relies on universal understandings of artistic experience, on the configuration of an “average spectator” who might be “affected” by the otherness of so-called Caribbean light.

By making the source of light and heat visible, minimal art and postwar modernism become entangled in planetary conversations about energy colonialism and racial capitalism. *Puerto Rican Light* therefore becomes much more than an exercise in cultural appropriation and ironic quotation, revealing that art is entangled with the conditions of possibility of survival and becoming of a crisis-driven contemporaneity; that the movement toward dematerialization in neo-avant-garde aesthetics was only possible through systemic, all-encompassing transformations and uneven power dynamics, that the emphasis on the museum as an ideological space should be expanded and completed through a careful examination of the ebbs and flows of debt and energy on a planetary scale.

Amusingly enough, the claiming of the mundane experience of contemplating a sunset is downplayed by Flavin’s intentional disavowal of part of his own experience when producing *Puerto Rican Light* in 1965: his attending a Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York. The parade brings us back to choreography and choreopolitics. The contrast between the explo-

sion of color and light and the concrete and political dimension of the mobilization of Puerto Ricans in the 1960s becomes clearer if we think that around this time Puerto Rican mobilization would coalesce in the golden moment of Nuyorican cultural and political effervescence. Flavin’s act of reducing a process of political mobilization to a parade and a complex geopolitics of modernity to “warm light” is problematic in at least two ways. First, it fails to see the choreopolitical dimension of mobilization, in this case marked by the sociopolitical awakening of the Nuyorican movement. Second, despite claiming to challenge universal experience and the neutrality of the white cube, minimalism ends up reproducing universalist values through the configuration of an ideal, Western spectator.

In Allora & Calzadilla’s piece, the fact of energy’s failing to power artistic modernism must be related to the collapse of the ideals of modernization and the bankruptcy of developmentalist agendas for Puerto Rico. If debt, dependency, and unemployment were the results of a process of industrialization predicated upon the logic of “catching up” with the centers of modern economics, *Puerto Rican Light* reveals that a similar dynamic takes place when it comes to regulating access to the space of canonical global modernism.

To be sure, the history of modern art in Puerto Rico is marked by the tensions and contradictions resulting from identifying modernism as “being-toward-movement.” We have seen how Allora & Calzadilla challenge the universality of reception, which minimal art places at the heart of the artistic process at the expense of the celebration of individual authorship. The questions raised by *Puerto Rican Light* are not uncommon. On the contrary, they resemble the debate on abstract art documented by Nelson Rivera, which pivoted around the question of whether abstract art was a US import and whether it should therefore be rejected as being part of a disavowal of Puerto Rican creative originality.<sup>17</sup> As in the negotiation with the mainstream history of minimal art we have explored, such engagement with the genealogies of abstraction is equally marked by ideological claims to universalism and the subtle war on position undertaken by Puerto Rican and Caribbean artists to create an equi-

distant positioning between the demands of universalist formalism and mainstream Western modernism and those of identity-based nationalism. It is worth mentioning as well that this effervescence of artistic experimentation (and, more in particular, of abstract art) took place in parallel with the articulation of radical political projects across the region. In the same way that Frank Bowling attempted to counter exoticist expectations by bringing together a modernist aesthetic and a radical political agenda, Puerto Rican artists working as contemporaries of Flavin (Luis Hernández Cruz comes to mind) managed to combine the aesthetic and perceptual aspirations of minimal and abstract art with an interest in the specificities of the Caribbean “environment.” The piece by Allora & Calzadilla we are examining in this section should, therefore, be seen as a critical contribution to a radical genealogy of cultural creativity that problematizes the absolute binary divisions between local and universal and that invests in artistic experimentation without disregarding crucial geopolitical and economic transformations. If *Puerto Rican Light* raises timely issues concerning energy colonialism and the choreographed nature of systemic dispossession, we move now to a work by Allora & Calzadilla that engages with abstraction and autonomy in relation to the fluxes and frequencies of financial deregulation and environmental collapse.

## Fluxes and Frequencies



Figure 5. Cadastre, (Meter Number 18257262, Consumption Charge 36.9kWh x \$0.02564, Rider FCA-Fuel Charge Adjusted 36.9kWh x \$0.053323, Rider PPCA-Purchase Power Charge Adjusted 36.9kWh x \$0.016752, Rider CILTA Municipalities Adjusted 36.9kWh x \$0.002376, Rider SUBA Subsidies \$1.084), 2019. Iron filings on linen 6 ft. x 70 ft. Installation view The Menil Collection, Houston. Image courtesy of Allora & Calzadilla.

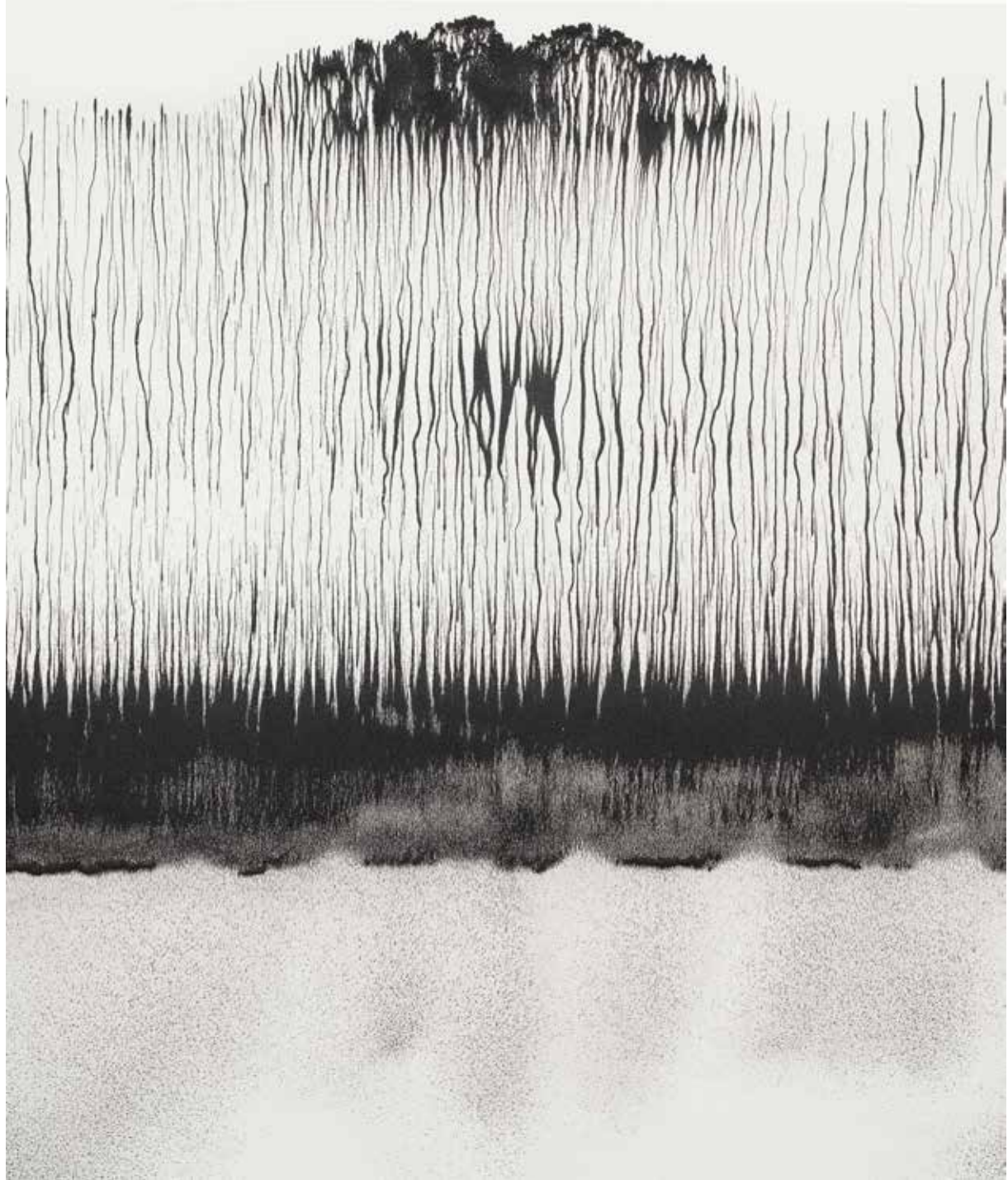


Figure 6. Cadastre, (Meter Number 18257262, Consumption Charge 36.9kWh x \$0.02564, Rider FCA-Fuel Charge Adjusted 36.9kWh x \$0.053323, Rider PPCA-Purchase Power Charge Adjusted 36.9kWh x \$0.016752, Rider CILTA Municipalities Adjusted 36.9kWh x \$0.002376, Rider SUBA Subsidies \$1.084), (Detail) 2019. Iron filings on linen 6 ft. x 70 ft. Installation view The Menil Collection, Houston. Image courtesy of Allora & Calzadilla.

**Puerto Rican Light, Cadastre**, a long, thin strap of canvas imprinted through electromagnetism, is deceptively simple. Produced in Puerto Rico in 2019, **Cadastre** translated the ebbs and flows of the island’s electricity system through an original system of copper cables that readjust iron filings placed on top of the canvas. The result of this electromagnetic movement configures the “painting,” generating a landscape in which it is possible to identify not only regularity but also variation and change.

The word “cadaster” refers to an inventory, to the act of measuring value and ownership, as well as of registering change, of remaining attentive to oscillation and alterations in shape and form. Etymologically, the work establishes an interesting connection with choreography and choreopolitics, as it is composed of κατά (downward motion) and στίχος (line). A double movement therefore takes place in **Cadastre**: a march, an ordered succession of phenomena that creates lines (as in a musical record, a poem, or a manuscript); and the downward imposition of these lines onto a preexisting surface. Cadasters, in other words, do more than register reality: they organize it by demarcating spaces, singularizing phenomena, establishing patterns. Cadasters generate intricate grids that normalize and permit registering and comparison, that transform our vision of reality by separating what moves (in order) from what does not, making space for a downward vision prepared to identify singularities and deviances.<sup>18</sup>

What does all this have to do with modernism and the Caribbean? Allora & Calzadilla’s **Cadastre** includes a subtitle that is quite revealing: **Meter Number 18257262, Consumption Charge 36.9 kWh x \$0.02564, Rider FCA-Fuel Charge Adjusted 36.9 kWh x \$0.053323, Rider PPCA-Purchase Power Charge Adjusted 36.9 kWh x \$0.016752, Rider CILTA-Municipalities Adjusted 36.9 kWh x \$0.002376, Rider SUBA Subsidies \$1.084**. The information provided corresponds to the artists’ workspace in San Juan, which is supplied by the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), the utility responsible for



generating, distributing, and capitalizing on the use of electricity in the island. The origins of PREPA predate World War II and testify to broader dynamics of energy colonialism, dependence, and debt: a state monopoly, PREPA is the result of a unification of several energy grids existing across the island. The company has been affected by underfunding resulting from recurrent budget cuts, but also by a precarious infrastructure that leads to recurrent blackouts. The consequences of these limitations are multiplied exponentially by “natural” catastrophes (such as Hurricanes Maria and Irma in 2017). PREPA’s dependence on fossil fuels (up to 97 percent)<sup>19</sup> does not seem to be coming to an end, as the company is in the process of being privatized, which will certainly affect accountability and dependency. This fossil fuel energy economy makes Puerto Rican electricity highly dependent on the international price of petroleum, which in turn makes oscillations and disparities the norm.

As an artwork, **Cadaestre** is the result of not only these oscillations but also a particular modern and colonial genealogy that distributes and naturalizes environmental degradation, economic dependence, and debt. The vertical lines that dominate the canvas convey the impression of abstract, aleatory forms, but they are in fact a careful account, a visual archive of political corruption, the mismanagement of public resources, and the reproduction of bond through debt and of debt as bonding.<sup>20</sup> **Cadaestre** is a grid registering the collapse of community and natural life in Puerto Rico, as well as a “creative force” telling its own story, translating onto the canvas its own ideology, reproducing itself by carefully and artfully portraying a telling image. **Puerto Rican Light, Cadaestre** is falsely “decorative,” giving the impression that there is nothing here to be examined, no ulterior truth to be derived from the contemplation of the canvas. And yet, the piece highlights the connection between modernist aesthetics, modernity-as-extraction, and artistic autonomy.

Writing in 1960, Clement Greenberg portrayed modernism as the intensification of self-criticism and the expansion of this rational way of seeing and being in the world to “almost

the whole of what is truly alive in our culture.”<sup>21</sup> Greenbergian modernism relies on a kind of mastery that emerges from the capacity of critically and autonomously confronting the creative process, rendering imperfections and interruptions irrelevant, eliminating any obstacle that could interrupt the perception of art as well as the perception of the viewer getting immersed in such critical contemplation. The process of “seeing oneself seeing” as an autonomous being reaches its culmination through the engagement with the flat surface of the rectangular canvas placed on the floor and available for the creative genius of the (male, middle-class, white) modernist artist to intervene and structure it.

Reading Greenberg’s landmark essay “Modernist Painting” with **Cadaestre** in mind is a stimulating exercise. If we forget for a moment that this essay was instrumental in explaining **and provoking** the evolution of the late modernist artworld and the establishment of New York as the new global cultural capital, if we forget that Greenberg is concerned with aesthetics and not so much with land tenure and pattern recognition, it would be quite easy to see in “Modernist Painting” echoes of the ideology of the cadaster, the language of statistics. If such an exercise were possible, we would see ourselves (me, you, us) seeing ourselves seeing Jackson Pollock experimenting with painting while moving freely around it as a kind of cartographer, not so much translating creative impulses onto the canvas as dropping lines onto it so that grids emerge. We would see an alternative picture of Pollock moving freely, this motion making others move, setting the score for a politics of following, a politics of what follows, of what comes next, what comes after, what comes late, as US imperialism, financial deregulation, and neocolonial extractivism disappears into the surface of reality while leaving its grid, its imprint. We would picture Pollock moving freely (therefore going beyond painting, mastering painting by turning the task of painting into a “meta” modernist reflection) as he drops lines of painting, which is to say as if he reinstates racial capitalism and heteronormativity by ejaculating onto the canvas, and then we would see similar lines coming closer to us, a recurrent pattern of falling lines demarcating world divisions, demar-



cating “dangerous neighborhoods” and neglected zones, distributing debt onto the surface of the map, intensifying the grid of energy dependence-as-dispossession beyond the land, under the oceans and toward the stars, cables, and satellites and drones updating Pollock’s and Greenberg’s dream of (manly) mastery and self-awareness.

Engaging with the work of the US dancer and choreographer Trisha Brown and the Spanish artist and dancer La Ribot, Lepecki points out that Pollock’s embrace of the dripping and championing of action-painting only represented a temporary deviation from the horizontality of pictorial perception that lies at the ground of artistic autonomy. According to this interpretation, the act of placing the canvas on the ground **grounds** painting and artistic creativity, highlighting the importance of experience and bodily motion in the creative process. At the same time, however, the nature of the process, in which the canvas remains open for the artist to colonize it by dropping or dripping lines onto it, marks the limitations of such mo(ve)ment. At the end, Lepecki argues, painting returns to the carefully curated politics of display of the gallery space, goes back to verticality, placing itself at the center of art histories while giving the (autonomous) viewer a position of privilege within the aesthetic experience. Lepecki compares feminist dance acts by Brown and La Ribot with the well-known filmed image of Pollock going around the canvas to point out not only the potentiality of horizontality but also the weight of institutional privilege that restrains choreopolitical actions by generating an inertia that urges artists to be productive, to finish (moving alongside) their work so that it can be exhibited.<sup>22</sup>

What is missing from this interpretation is the realization that the turn toward the spectacular/autonomous is concerned not so much with art as with statistics, with κατά and στίχος, with the systematic, murderous calculations resulting from lines falling into the surface of reality. We should pause here and see Pollock seeing the canvas while moving around it with Puerto Rican Light, the light of extracted energy and the acceleration of global environmen-

tal collapse. We should see the grid of action-painting reaching beyond the canvas while ensnaring mo(ve)ments of flight, fugitive forms (not unlike the amorphous, uncartographed shapes registered in **Cadastre**) that refuse to be patterned, that challenge statistical normalization. We should pause and remember that the geography of late modernism is not that of the transfer of the world’s art capital from Paris to New York but rather the gridded scenario of a Cold War that is better understood as a war on resources, as an attempt to externalize conflict so property, taxation, and financial speculation (the lines powering the cadaster, the powering lines of energy colonialism) can be layered upon a flattened world, a world on its way toward globalization, without resistance.

**Cadastre** therefore holds up a peculiar historicity. On the one hand, the piece refers to recent events and processes, including Irma and Maria in 2017, a horizon of privatization, decades of interventionist politics, and the ups and downs of petrol economies. On the other, the piece reaches back and engages with the ideology of Greenbergian modernism, with the statistical and world-ecological dimension of horizontality and verticality within modernist painting. Finally, the piece also suggests a modernist aesthetics that does not need the human anymore, in which autonomous movement and creative imperatives are no longer the prerogative of **Homo sapiens**. From this complex, multilayered temporality, **Cadastre** opens up fertile ground for an examination of the afterlives of modernist aesthetics and the coloniality of artistic autonomy, one that offers itself as particularly pressing in our times.

Allora & Calzadilla’s engagement with the neo-avant-garde offers important insights into modernist aesthetics at a planetary level. The two artworks examined here engage with the artistic movements that were developed during the central decades of the twentieth century in a way that reveals the silences and absences within global histories of modernism as well as in debates on modernism. **Puerto Rican Light** and **Cadastre** challenge universalist notions of the creative genius and uniform, Western-centered spectatorship, but they also

establish a crucial link between modernist aesthetics and planetary transformations. The long-term consequences of this connection urge us to look at issues of periodization in creative ways, not so much by reimagining artistic modernism as an open-ended project as by remaining attentive to the productive rearticulations of modernist forms and techniques being made by contemporary creators in order to address the present.

By engaging with and repurposing the techniques of the neo-avant-garde, these works reveal that Caribbean modernism is deeply entangled with the choreographed movements of capitalism in the web of life, as well as with the construction of nonchoreographed, multitemporal dance/moves. ***Puerto Rican Light*** poses the question of perception and experience from a crisis-driven point of view, highlighting the material conditions that make the global circulation and contemplation of art possible, and ultimately bringing modernist aesthetics as close as possible to the project of logistics. For its part, ***Cadastre*** not only mocks abstract expressionism but also builds up something new, something resulting from the “immaterial” circulation of global finance, which is here connected to the too-tangible consequences of the dematerialization of everything. Key questions concerning modernist aesthetics (questions regarding perception, experience, the objectivity of the exhibition con-

text, and the role of the art institution) expand to take on a planetary dimension. This is just one of the many ways contemporary Caribbean artistic practice looks at the genealogies of aesthetic modernism in search of clues and solutions to some of the most pressing matters that currently haunt us.

### **Acknowledgments**

This article benefited enormously from the insights offered by the colleagues participating in the symposium “What and When Was Caribbean Modernism?,” which took place in Amsterdam, 9–11 November 2023. A huge thanks to the staff at the Wereldmuseum and Framer Framed in Amsterdam that provided generous support for the event. I want to acknowledge the generosity of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, who kindly provided access to the images included in this article. Thank you also to Esmee Schoutens, Dantaé Elliott, and Olombi Bois for their continuous support during the time in which this essay was produced. Special thanks to David Scott, Vanessa Pérez-Rosario, and Wayne Modest for their generosity and lifelong commitment to critical and radical thinking. Thanks also to Inês Pina and the research and educational team of the Serralves Foundation in Porto, Portugal. Thanks to Pat Odber for her attentive eye and inspiring dedication to critical thinking. As always, I have to acknowledge the support of my colleague, partner, and source of inspiration Leonor de Oliveira, who provided insightful feedback on the essay.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Throughout the essay, I refer to “planetary” transformations and aesthetics. The use of the term “planetary” is intentional and draws on current debates on this topic; see, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). At the same time, however, I believe that contemporary artistic practice is producing its own body of knowledge on this matter. My engagement with the “planetary turn,” therefore, is indebted to theoretical conceptualizations of the topic, but I also want to move beyond these and analyze contemporary Caribbean artistic practice as a site where original ideas that go beyond not only national but also global or regional scales are produced. While I acknowledge the utility of debates on the Capitalocene (and the manifold iterations of the Anthropocene), this essay attempts to highlight artistic practices that take on the challenge of thinking critically on the planetary scale of geocultural transformations.
- 2 My experience of *Puerto Rican Light* and *Cadastre* is informed by my engagement with both works in the context of the exhibition *Allora & Calzadilla: Entelechy*, which was displayed in 2023 in the Serralves Foundation in Porto, Portugal. In June 2023 I was invited by the Serralves Museum to deliver a public talk and to coordinate a conversation with the exhibition audience. These activities allowed me to witness a diversity of responses and reactions among the heterogeneous audience Serralves usually brings together. These insights have been extremely productive in the process of writing this essay.
- 3 See Hal Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?,” *October* 70 (1994): 5–32.
- 4 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 5 This question is quoted from the opening sentences of the prompt that participants received before the symposium “What and When Was Caribbean Modernism?”
- 6 Peter Sloterdijk, *La mobilisation infinie* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 2000); André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 7 Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 7.
- 8 See Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 9 Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 58.
- 10 Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 12.
- 11 For Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, logistics is at the center of racial capitalism and the modern and colonial project. See Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Williamsburg, NY: Autonomedia, 2013).
- 12 For a detailed discussion of the diverse iterations and displays of *Puerto Rican Light*, see Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy, ed., *Puerto Rican Light* (New York: Americas Society, 2005).
- 13 See Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).
- 14 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 38.
- 15 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 1.
- 16 In the case of *Puerto Rican Light: Cueva Vientos*, the interaction with the natural environment added an additional layer to the work, as it established a procedural dimension to the perception and interaction with the installation. *Puerto Rican Light* has likewise been displayed in gallery spaces.
- 17 Nelson Rivera, *Con urgencia: Escritos sobre arte puertorriqueño* (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2009).
- 18 At this level, cadasters are closely linked to statistics, which are in turn a central tool of governmentality. For an insightful example of how statistics, data collecting, police records, and systemic racism predate the recent boom of AI, see Matteo Pasquinelli, *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence* (London: Verso, 2023).
- 19 US Energy Information Administration, “Puerto Rico Territory Energy Profile,” <https://www.eia.gov/state/print.php?sid=RQ#:~:text=However%2C%20on%20a%20per%2Dcustomer,as%20similar%20U.S.%20mainland%20utilities.&text=Fossil%20fuels%20provide%20about%2097,97%25%20of%20Puerto%20Rico’s%20electricity>.
- 20 See Maurizio Lazzarato, *Governing by Debt* (Amsterdam: Semiotext(e), 2015).
- 21 Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” pamphlet originally published in 1960 in *Voice of America*, [https://www.yorku.ca/yamlau/readings/greenberg\\_modernistPainting.pdf](https://www.yorku.ca/yamlau/readings/greenberg_modernistPainting.pdf).
- 22 Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, 67–68.

# Yra van Dijk

## Dutch Caribbean Modernism: Post from the Start

**YRA VAN DIJK** is a Professor of Dutch Literature and Researcher at Leiden University of Applied Sciences. She also teaches in the MA Dutch Studies at the Anton de Kom University in Paramaribo. After publishing volumes and monographs on Late-postmodern literature (*Reconsidering the postmodern. European Literature Beyond Relativism*, 2011), on Intertextuality and on Shoah-Memory, she is now researching postcolonial memory in modern and Caribbean literature for a next monograph: *Structures of Signification in Dutch-Caribbean Literature* (with Thalia Ostendorf, Amsterdam University Press, 2025).



Nothing is so magnificent  
As the voice  
That calls out  
In the chaos of the day  
—Johanna Schouten-Elsenhout, “Woman”

Until quite recently, voices from the Dutch-speaking Caribbean have remained largely disregarded by literary historians in the Netherlands, for whom modern literature has predominantly equaled white literature. If mentioned at all in Dutch literary historiography, Dutch Caribbean writers were reduced to being either the realist archivists of their cultural backgrounds (such as Frank Martinus Arion) or “autonomous” poets without context or biography (such as Hans Faverey). What might it look like to adopt an integrative approach and apply the concepts of literary history while taking into account historical context, language, and landscapes? What would such an analysis reveal about modernist Caribbean literature?

Modernism’s association with bourgeois ideology, or, at best, its appropriation of non-Western artistic practices, makes conceptualizing Dutch Caribbean literary modernism less than obvious.<sup>1</sup> Did modernist emphasis on “autonomous” or even neoclassical literature not rather suppress the distribution and canonization of texts written in other styles, and of narratives that told an entirely different story?<sup>2</sup> And if the modernist form does appear in the Caribbean, is it a form of appropriation of European modernism? Or is it rather an authentic expression of a subjectivity experienced as fragmented or plural? If modernism aims to express (or counterbalance) the emergent existential paradigms of modernity through innovative artistic forms, Caribbean modernism inherently delineates a departure from its European counterpart.<sup>3</sup> New forms are found or referred to intertextually, like elsewhere. But above all else, the ostensibly “universal” experience of traditional modernity or of the new subject is measured against the Caribbean environment and its corresponding subject position.

Like many intellectuals from the Caribbean, young scholars from the Dutch “West Indies” in the early twentieth century pursued university education in Europe, having been formed in a complex, multilingual, postslavery colonial context. Once in Europe, authors from Suriname and the Antilles like Cola Debrot, Albert Helman, Anton de Kom, and later Edgar Cairo, Bea Vianen, and Astrid Roemer, became steeped in international literary modernism. Many of them also encountered nationalists from the colonial spheres—in the Dutch context, Indonesia.

The main thesis of this essay is that these personal, historical, and cultural circumstances allowed for the emergence of a specific form of modernism that ensued in dialogue with the globally evolving postcolonial and anticolonial paradigm. This dialogue of influences meant that Dutch-speaking Caribbean modernism was a precursor of what after the war was called poststructuralism or postmodernism. If we understand “post” not in its temporal form but as a critical variant, Dutch Caribbean modernism was “post” from the very beginning: it constitutes a distinctively critical and social modernism, employing a poststructuralist approach to analyze and deconstruct the frameworks of knowledge, power, language, and technology in which the colonial subject is formed. I will apply the Caribbean “postness” of modernism here as a framework, paying attention to the works’ implicit and explicit critiques of colonialist structures and the symbolic order.

This framework will allow us to see more clearly Anton de Kom’s sharp critique of knowledge systems and historiography in *We Slaves of Suriname* (1934), decades ahead of Frantz Fanon or Michel Foucault. It also offers tools to aptly demonstrate how Cola Debrot deconstructed the opposition between the center and periphery of modernity as early as 1935. After World War II, emancipatory texts in the vernacular followed in the Dutch Caribbean, along with polyphonic and intertextual narrative styles like those of Boelie van Leeuwen and Edgar Cairo—the latter using his own type of vernacular, not so much as “ballast against the dislocating currents of the modern,” as Dave Gunning articulates it but as a search for

a polyphonic novel as a form of social critique.<sup>4</sup> After the country gained independence, it was Astrid Roemer who rewrote Suriname's history as a blend of Indigenous, African, Indian, and European narratives and memories. In her trilogy, the country is a posthumanist relational sphere, in which even nature is infected with colonial and racial oppression and sexual violence.

The work of these authors demonstrates a deconstruction of systems of knowledge and discourse that does not accommodate forms of intellectual poststructuralism which may exclude or oppose political engagement.<sup>5</sup> We will explore how these authors deployed their literary form of modernism for political resistance, with intertextual references to local geography and idioms. In this essay, I will highlight some aspects of this inherent "postness" of Dutch Caribbean modernism and discuss it in relation to postcolonial theory. After an introduction to the specific situation and infrastructure of Dutch Caribbean literature, we will examine epistemological criticism, form innovation, and, finally, intertextual metafiction.

### **Dutch Caribbean Literature**

Dutch Caribbean literature is geographically divided between the South American country of Suriname and the three "Leeward" islands of the Netherlands Antilles: Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. Although the literature from these two areas (mainland and islands) reflects the significant differences in nature, history, language, culture, and infrastructure, there are nevertheless good reasons to speak of one Dutch-speaking Caribbean literature here. After all, the international influences and exchanges, the relationship with the colonial occupier and its official language correspond. It is precisely by zooming out and considering the entire Dutch Caribbean that we gain insight into the characteristics of a specific form of modernism.

Perhaps it is a controversial choice to conceive of a shared literary paradigm across these diverging areas, as it removes texts from their specific context. Literary criticism of the

"Dutch West Indies" generally focuses on texts that can be culturally and historically localized: connections and references are analyzed and explained by specialists.<sup>6</sup> But the focus on modernism calls for a different, comprehensive approach, in which this attention to the material and historical environment is combined with an analysis that centers the modernist emphasis on the subject and formal aspects of the work. This is precisely why I think it is fruitful to deploy the concept of modernism in the Caribbean context, despite the doubts of, among others, Achille Mbembe, who stresses that different material conditions limit the usability of Western concepts for other contexts.<sup>7</sup>

Employing the modernist framework in a non-European context, I seek to avoid the perpetuation of self-fulfilling prophecies of European literary historiography, in which only what was "new" was considered valuable. Rather, it is the dialogue with the "new" that modernity brought forth that can be analyzed more clearly through this framework. Dutch Caribbean modernism initiated this dialogue in the 1930s, especially in the work of Anton de Kom and Albert Helman.

Since we understand Caribbean modernism here as a self-reflexive critique of the colonial cultural and political frameworks in which it was produced, it is not surprising that it gained momentum after the independence of the Dutch colonies of Indonesia (1945–48) and Suriname (1975). In the postwar period, literature began to turn away from realist conventions and draw out the effect of migration and exile on the emigrant's subjectivity, as Gunning outlines.<sup>8</sup> This shift was characterized by authors' attempts to embrace, as Paul Gilroy articulates, "the fragmentation of self (doubling and splitting) which modernity seems to promote."<sup>9</sup>

Gilroy argues that we should place more emphasis on the postmodern within Caribbean modernism: “The periodisation of the modern and the postmodern is thus of the most profound importance for the history of blacks in the West and for chronicling the shifting relations of domination and subordination between Europeans and the rest of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

My emphasis here will be on postmodernism as manifest through self-reflexive and inter-discursive literature, on those instances where language, text, and intertext are foregrounded and under discussion as vehicles for exploring or conveying the specifically Caribbean experience and situation. Self-reflexivity is not exclusively or typically a Caribbean strategy, but foregrounding these aspects serves to highlight those instances within the text where signification itself is in question. So what is primarily at stake here is the question of *how this literature signifies and which reality it thereby produces*, rather than the cultural-historical realities it describes themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Deploying the concept of postmodernism here also means paying attention to the self-consciousness of texts about their context and place in a cultural system. Many in-depth or rather broadening texts have been written on Dutch Caribbean literature, with Michiel van Kempen’s *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur* being the undisputed highlight. But far fewer comparative texts have been written in which things are seen in a larger Caribbean, theoretical, or historical light. In his essay “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” Edward Kamau Brathwaite describes the “fragments and instability of the societies” with the “absence of an aboriginal base”: it is the pluralism also theorized by Édouard Glissant and, for example, Antonio Benítez-Rojo. Here we will not talk about pluralism but about attempts to make meaning within that very pluralism and “chaos” (Benítez-Rojo) or to criticize the way meanings and structures were constituted. Modernist cultural expressions had to contend with what Brathwaite calls “the rigid classificatory orders (culture, class, colour, money, status) set up as the result of colonialism and slavery, developed into caste-like structures.”<sup>12</sup>

Bound up in the demands of its particular sociohistorical context, Caribbean modernism inherently functioned as a critique of structures and of the symbolic order: “post” from its outset.

This self-reflexive modernism is interwoven with the material conditions, societal and institutional transformations of the Dutch Caribbean societies striving for national and cultural independence. Those are the conditions that made possible the emergence of a body of literature that functioned as an instrument of anti- and decolonial critique and national independence and identity. Before analyzing modernist self-reflexivity and intertextuality, we must therefore first describe the colonial “infrastructures of modernism” that shaped the Dutch-speaking Caribbean tradition.

### **Infrastructures of Modernism**

In the Netherlands and Flanders, we saw the familiar Western division into “high modernism,” on the one hand, and avant-garde, on the other. Each had a different esthetic response to the alienation of the values of modern culture. Modernist authors were searching for a spiritual or esthetic dimension amid a world of chaos, often drawing from classical Western culture: their position was more conservative. Avant-garde movements saw the author more progressively as an integral part of history and society, much like the Romantic authors aspiring for work that would ultimately change society, which resulted in an “effort to radically change the form and function of art in modern culture.”<sup>13</sup>

Both forms of modernism can be seen in texts by authors from Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles. Albert Helman, for instance, wrote modernist novels of consciousness like *Mijn aap schreit* (My monkey weeps, 1928), while Cola Debrot’s “My Black Sister” (1935) similarly engages with modernist themes. These authors studied and lived in Europe, where they wrote their work and were published and reviewed. Nonetheless, their texts are Ca-

ibbean in all respects, prompting an analysis of the implications of migrating a European concept like modernism within this context. In such a move, we must take into account the “historical trajectory into and through the complex histories of colonization, conquest, and enslavement,” as Stuart Hall puts it.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, taking into account the heterogeneous multicultural context and corresponding multilingualism, the weak cultural infrastructure, and also the strong influence of nationalism, especially in Suriname, which gained independence in 1975, it becomes evident that a Dutch-speaking Caribbean modernism is a different thing altogether from its European counterpart.

The written literary culture in Suriname and the Antilles began to grow after 1950. An education system was developed, librarianship flourished, and an increasing amount of literary work was published, generally printed by authors themselves for lack of publishers. Many of those texts were in Dutch. Until World War II, Surinamese theater also was mainly in Dutch, while literary production in Sranantongo, Sarnami, and Papiamentu remained fairly limited: “The lack of an official spelling and of school education in this language has been a serious handicap for the use of Sranantongo as a written language. The pioneering work of Koenders and later Bruma, Trefossa, Doorson, and Cairo, has not been followed up in newly published prose in Sranan.”<sup>15</sup> In addition to these oft-mentioned male authors (later we may add Michaël Slory as well), poet Johanna Schouten-Elsenhout also wrote in Sranantongo, and was a strong advocate of the national language. Her poems can be read as an ode to ancestors and an indictment of colonial rule. Hillary Clinton’s reading in a speech in The Hague in 1999 made Schouten-Elsenhout’s poem “Uma” particularly well-known.<sup>16</sup> Due to the many enjambments and transparent language, her poems have a strong modernist effect:

**Woman**

Nothing is so magnificent

As the voice  
That calls out  
In the chaos of the day  
  
That voice is beautiful  
She is powerful  
She knows no hatefulness  
Even if storms  
would carry that with them  
  
Woman you are majestic  
You shine  
You do not falter  
In the midst of the struggle  
of every day

**(Uma**

Noti no hei so  
Lek’ a sten  
D’ e bari  
In’ dyugudyugu f’ a dei  
A sten moi  
A krakti  
A n’ abi farsi  
Wins’ tranga winti  
E seiri èn kon  
Uma i hei



Y' e brenki  
I n' e kanti  
A mindri strei  
F' aladei)<sup>17</sup>

The cultural institution Sticusa and its associated stage, the Cultural Centre Suriname, supported writers with grants and purchases. Newspapers reviewed new works and short-lived literary magazines emerged in the postwar period. These did not have a very clear poetic or political program, apart from *Kolibri* and the Dutch-based journal *Mamjo*, “which revolted against the indolence of an unoriginal literary nationalism.”<sup>18</sup>

In the course of the 1960s, literature evolved into a conduit for voicing social discontent and advocating for Suriname’s independence. While in Suriname (with no education in the vernacular) it was difficult for poets in Sranantongo to find and reach an audience, they were more successful in the Netherlands. Many Surinamese authors spent time in the Netherlands, for example in student circles, around *Mamjo* and in societies such as Ons Suriname (Our Suriname).<sup>19</sup> The last issue of *Mamjo* (1963) was the most experimental and included among its contents the work of Corly Verlooghen (under the pseudonym Rudy Bedacht) and John Leefmans (Jo Löffel). The latter wrote

if the song sounds a little too sad for you  
close your eyes clap! and monk.  
at the intersection under pavers  
lies wood a transverse rod  
already through my black breath  
read the evening paper  
pray your evening lament

sand a rain by ribbon blinds  
once stood white a jasmine here  
where now the frosted asphalt cross  
under which I pray  
ragged  
birds from the blue mosquito net,  
wind wind dance the wind  
remote all around growls the drum  
godedrum godedrum  
dance the wind the wind  
the wind but if 't sounds a bit too sad to you  
close your eyes to the spark  
behind the eyelid soft red twinkle  
turn off the head and monk.

(als 't lied u iets te droevig klinkt  
sluit uw ogen klap! en monkel.  
op het kruispunt onder plavuizen  
ligt hout een dwarse staaf  
reeds door mijn zwarte adem  
lees het avondblad  
bid uw avondklacht  
zand een regen door ribbenblinden  
eens stond hier wit een jasmijn  
waar nu het matte asfaltkruis  
waaronder ik geradbraakt  
vogels uit de blauwe klamboe bid,

wind wind dans de wind  
veraf rondom gromt de trom  
godetrom godetrom  
dans de wind de wind  
de wind maar als 't u iets te droevig klinkt  
sluit uw ogen voor de genster  
achter het ooglid zachtrood gefonkel  
draai af het hoofd en monkel.)<sup>20</sup>

Diverging views are possible regarding Dutch cultural politics in the Caribbean. V. S. Naipaul praised them in 1962, arguing that Suriname, with all its different population groups, was far more cosmopolitan than, say, Trinidad: “The Dutch have offered assimilation but not made it obligatory. This tolerance and understanding of alien cultures . . . Suriname has come out of Dutch rule as the only truly cosmopolitan territory in the West Indian region.”<sup>21</sup> De Kom and others criticized this “tolerance,” inversely interpreting it as indifference and neglect. Much later, Elleke Boehmer and Frances Gouda also analyzed the situation and observed that Dutch colonies never had the chance “to write back” due to the lack of acculturation (especially in the Dutch East Indies—present-day Indonesia). The Netherlands has an extremely heterogeneous diaspora, they argue. Borrowing, mimicry, and translation do not exist or at least are not adapted to the Dutch situation.<sup>22</sup>

Unique in terms of its tolerance toward Dutch cultural influences was the nationalist cultural movement *Wie Eegie Sanie* (Our own things), organized around writer Eddy Bruma. The group emphasized the importance of the local culture for decolonization, nationalism, and Surinamese identity.<sup>23</sup> However, integrating Dutch cultural influence was permissible in their view of national emancipation, as Jan Voorhoeve and Ursy Lichtveld explain:

Its spokesmen always stressed their essential openness to influences from

other cultures. They even accepted Dutch culture as part of their cultural heritage, but they wanted to shape their own national culture, in which all Surinamese people could participate. . . . Especially among fellow students the soulless imitation of Western habits was scorned, and non-European behaviour was applauded as something new and original. What might have been a reason for pride back home became a badge of shame and disgrace. . . . This movement teaches self-respect as the essential basis for mutual understanding between different groups. . . . *Wie Eegie Sanie* tries to free every individual from biases against his own language and cultural values, not in the belief that it is better than any other but that it is equally valuable. . . . Acculturation therefore seems an inevitable phenomenon in colonial society.<sup>24</sup>

Bruma’s poem *Mi brama mama* was originally written in Sranantongo:

### **My Black Mother**

My black mother  
dozes on her bench,  
all the children have gone to bed.  
Old mother, come rise, go to sleep,  
I know how weary you are, mother.  
Now only do I see  
where your hair to white has turned,  
and the creases beneath your eye.  
Come, let us softly smooth them out  
that you do not wake up, mother . . .

And now that you laugh in your slumber  
I see your ugly teeth, Oh dearest mother.  
Come, wake up, go to bed,  
you've dozed enough for the while

**(Mi braka mama**

Mi braka mama  
na tap' hen bangi e dyonko,

ala pikin go sribi kaba.

Mi owru mama, kon, opo go sribi,  
mi sab fa yu weri mama.

Now fosi mi de si

pe yu wiwir e weti,

èn den proy na ondro yu ay.

Kon, mek mi grat den safri-safri

fu mek yu no wiki, mama . . .

Èn noya di y'e lafu na ini yu sribi,

m'e si yu takru tifi, o lobi mama.

Kon, wiki, go na yu bedi,

yu dyonko nofo kaba.)<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the most classically modernist poetic voice from the Dutch Caribbean is that of Bernardo Ashetu (Henk van Ommeren, 1929–82). The Surinamese poet chose the name Ashetu, and published his first collection with Dutch publisher De Bezige Bij in 1962, a pe-

riod when Bea Vianen, Astrid Roemer, Edgar Cairo, and Boelie van Leeuwen also debuted. The traveling poet (he worked as a telegraph operator) produced work that could be called “relational” in the vein of Glissant. He connects names and continents, all from a “distinct form of Black pride and Black self-consciousness and activism.”<sup>26</sup> Often we see a longing for Surinamese origins too, as is evidenced here by the convergence of the Anansi stories, the dark waters of the “creeks,” and the presence of a Black sister:

**Memory**

Spider with the red nails, is the little  
song I sing. For the first time  
it sounded long ago when I  
sat by a black creek next to  
my Black sister. Blue  
butterflies flew around and flew past  
the dark tree in which she sat.  
With its red nails, the spider,  
Which elicited from my sister the song,  
that echoes in my memory.

**(Herinnering**

Spin met de rode nagels, heet het kleine  
lied dat ik zing. Voor 't eerst heeft  
het geklonken lang geleden toen ik  
zat bij een zwarte kreek naast

mijn zuster en negerin. Blauwe  
vlinders vlogen rond en vlogen langs  
de duistere boom waarin zij zat  
met haar rode nagels, de spin,  
die aan mijn zuster 't lied ontlokte,  
dat naklinkt in mijn herinnering.)<sup>27</sup>

Ashetu immersed himself in Africa's past, and also in the work of well-known Black thinkers and poets: Malcolm X, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon, for example. He often refers, directly or indirectly, to the history of slavery and enslavement in his poetry.<sup>28</sup> Yet he wrote his poems only in Dutch. Their transparent form and the return to the simplicity of repetition are striking, and at times reminiscent of the almost children's verse written by the Fleming Paul van Ostaijen in the 1920s. An example is this poem by Ashetu:

### The Child

The child of reckoning  
that child, that forgotten child.  
What does it see it sees a  
black cat playing by a  
sunflower and what a sun,  
what a sun shines on  
the black cat, on his black  
back so shiny black, so  
shiny, shiny black that  
the child forgets and falls asleep  
soft in sweet dreams.

### (Het kind

Het kind van de rekening  
dat kind, dat achtergebleven kind.  
Wat ziet het daar voor een  
zwarte kat spelen bij een  
zonnebloem en wat een zon,  
wat een zon schijnt er op  
de zwarte kat, op zijn zwarte  
rug zo blinkend zwart, zo  
blinkend, blinkend zwart dat  
het kind vergeet en inslaapt  
zacht in zoete dromen.)<sup>29</sup>

In the Antilles, there were no professional publishers either, and, if author Boelie van Leeuwen is to be believed, no professional writers: "On the island, they don't even know the term *artist*; here, you are a man who writes a book; like someone building a doghouse, along the lines of: clean up the mess, we are going to eat."<sup>30</sup> Even more than elsewhere in the Caribbean, authors on the islands could choose from different languages and jumped from Dutch to Spanish or English or Papiamentu: "Dutch-language Antillean work published by a publisher based in the Netherlands for predominantly Dutch readers necessarily raises tensions."<sup>31</sup>

As in Suriname, there was a strong theater tradition, with generally social and realist plays. The occasional theater festivals, however, could not disguise the lack of literary infrastructure, notes Wim Rutgers, echoing Derek Walcott: "Indeed, they do not conceal the fact that there is no really large and loyal *readership* for new and existing work."<sup>32</sup> Not for Dutch liter-



ature or for Papiamentu work either. For lack of publishing houses, magazines like *De Stoep* (1940–51) acted as publishers. The situation was similar to that in Paramaribo concerning the founding of magazines, though they often had short lifespans. Thus, the cultural environment in the twentieth century was not particularly conducive to fostering a modern, literary culture in the Dutch Caribbean. Issues such as the absence of regulations around copyright and distribution did not contribute to this either. Ultimately, renewal must be facilitated by material conditions and a thriving literary field.

### **Epistemology and Historiography: Anton de Kom**

Given the sociohistorical conditions outlined above, it is not surprising that the first literary text by a Surinamese author in direct opposition to slavery was written in Dutch and published in the Netherlands in 1934. *We Slaves of Suriname* by Anton de Kom addressed not only his Suriname compatriots but also readers in the Netherlands. The “we” in the text is often open to multiple interpretations. Just as Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker) intended to do for the Dutch East Indies with *Max Havelaar*, a novel that has been canonized and is anchored in Dutch cultural memory, de Kom sought to elicit a response from the colonial rulers with his ironic text: a fairer, more humane administration of what was then still a colony, and a recognition and rectification of economic malpractice.

But he aimed to reach his countrymen too. De Kom’s furious, lyrical book was supposed to give Surinamese people back their history and their heroes. Abused or murdered enslaved people, at best names in the archives, were given a biography by de Kom. Joosje, Codjo, Flora, and Frederik became characters in de Kom’s compelling, semifictional scenes from their lives.

At a time when Suriname was still a neglected province of the Netherlands, de Kom sought to instill self-respect in his countrymen. “No people can reach full maturity,” he wrote, “as long as they remain burdened with an inherited sense of inferiority.”<sup>33</sup> The intellectual de Kom thus primarily targeted not the deeds of the Dutch (although their atrocities are discussed at length and in gruesome detail) but the absence of objective historiography about them.<sup>34</sup> When he was young, “venerable” mission brothers from Holland taught him and his classmates all about Piet Hein and William the Silent but nothing about their own national heroes. “And the system worked,” de Kom concludes. “It took a long time before I could free myself entirely from the obsessive belief that a Negro is always and unreservedly inferior to any white.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, de Kom unveils the workings of systematic colonial oppression, operating along lines of language hierarchies and one-sided conceptions of knowledge. He criticizes what Brathwaite later addressed: “Our cultural history (essentially of the inner plantation) has had no ‘archive’ to work from.”<sup>36</sup> Even an encyclopedia like the *Winkler Prins* mentioned in a seemingly neutral tone that after the Maroons’ uprisings “a time of peace and prosperity” arrived: “Whose peace?” de Kom asks. “Whose prosperity? And how much blood did it cost, how much cruelty, how much destruction?!”<sup>37</sup>

Quoting from archival documents, such as court records, de Kom demonstrates how systematic the violence was. In doing so, he mainly draws on the work of historians. De Kom himself was not a historian but a political and literary activist. This results in a seductive and wondrous text. Lyrical and personal passages alternate with meticulous analyses of profit-and-loss accounts of agricultural land in 1930s Suriname. It is neither a novel, a pamphlet, nor an autobiography, and at the same time it is all of these. Through the deployment of literary strategies such as irony, the work challenges and resists the archival system itself, not only by refusing to serve as merely a supplement to it but also by undermining its seemingly neutral form. De Kom articulates his anger, for example, with rhetorical questions (what

kind of civilization did they bring?) and cutting cynicism. The plantation owner, for example, traverses “at a leisurely gait, he crosses the lush fields, where the plants seem to grow all the better the more they are fertilized with Negro blood.”<sup>38</sup>

De Kom’s literary genius lies in the fact that he invites the addressed “you,” the “white reader,” to alternately adopt the perspective of both the “we,” the Surinamese, and that of the Dutch—who, “amid the noise of the big city, amid typewriters and calculating machines, dream of the golden plenitude of bygone ages.”<sup>39</sup> He asks for empathy from the reader: “You too must sense some part of the despair and sorrow of the Blacks, dragged out of their homes, far from their families, seasick and malnourished, full of dread at their unknown destination.”<sup>40</sup> The “we” that de Kom uses designates in and of itself a deconstruction of opposing positions, as Duco van Oostrum points out: “He challenges the ‘we’ of Dutch representation, inclusion, and differentiation. This intervention does not reassert an ‘us and them’ rhetoric.”<sup>41</sup> Van Oostrum argues that the “special form” of de Kom’s work problematizes its classification, and thus aligns with what Gilroy had in mind for the representation of the Black Atlantic: “Gilroy describes it perfectly as a ‘self-consciously polyphonic form,’ suggesting that this ‘distinct blend was also an important influence on the development of black literary modernism.’”<sup>42</sup> It is this self-consciousness that makes *We Slaves of Suriname* a modernist Surinamese text: writing itself is revealed to be part of a system of oppression, in the same years as the Harlem Renaissance was said “to stake a claim for American blacks in the centre and at the heart of modernism itself,” as Stuart Hall put it.<sup>43</sup> The deconstruction of texts as complicit in colonial power relations would remain a constant in Dutch Caribbean modernism.

### Media as Systems of Oppression: Cola Debrot

In the infrastructure of colonialism and slavery, writing played a crucial role. Laws, log books, (trade) letters, and property papers were the nonneutral nodes in a web of exploitation and

oppression. Engagement with the notion that any texts are part of this symbolic order and therefore complicit in it can be seen as a literary modernist reflection on its own form.

This oppressive symbolic order is undermined from within in an early Freudian novella by Cola Debrot, a Dutch Antillean author of Spanish European descent who went on to become governor of the Netherlands Antilles (1962–70). His sixty-six-page “My Black Sister” (1935) was recognized straight away as an important modernist text. In its early reception, however, the Dutch emphasis was primarily on the “universal” meaning of the story, while the racist stereotypes and the local and historical specificities were left unaddressed. Inversely, the Antillean readers saw it as a largely realistic text. Only since the 1980s has some scholarly attention been paid to the colonial context of the story, mostly pointing out the utopian or critical potential of “My Black Sister,” for example in how its ending imagines a possible new relationship between white and Black people.

Narrated by a voice that almost coincides with the vocalizing white, male main character, Frits Ruprecht, we hear how he arrives after fourteen years of absence on the West Indian island of his birth (which has traits of both Bonaire and Curaçao). When Frits, after a stopover at the home of a childhood friend who has become a district officer, arrives at his father’s plantation, he encounters a Black servant named Maria. Maria appears to be the playmate from his youth, and gradually it dawns on him that chances are she is also his half-sister. When he nevertheless visits her in her bedroom, his incestuous intent is narrowly thwarted by the old caretaker, Wancho (Maria’s grandfather, Wantsjo in Dutch), who bangs on the door and shouts that Maria and Frits do indeed share the same father. Frits goes back to the bedroom: “It was a hard road back to the house, where he had found a sister but lost a lover.”<sup>44</sup> Such a synopsis does not do justice to the rather gothic atmosphere of the short story, which is a chiaroscuro of past and present, certainties and uncertainties, of the living and the dead. Frits’s experiences on the island are always entwined with oedipally tinted memories of his childhood and his parents. He thinks back to symbiotic moments

with his mother, and engages in a rivalry with his father—which by extension may be read as a competition with the patriarchal colonial system at large.

The plantation system was exercised by this father-figure with recourse to keys, guns (still in his “office”), and letters written on a typewriter.<sup>45</sup> Wancho, the plantation steward, used to deliver the thousands of letters from Frits’s father, who suffered from what is colloquially termed “writing anger,” a Dutch expression that aptly resonates with the symbolic power of writing in the novella. Wancho almost transforms into a kind of letter himself: “The blackness of his face stood out sharply against the whiteness of his shirt, like black sealing-wax on a white envelope.”<sup>46</sup> The Black people of the island transmit messages with their bodies, including in the district master’s house: “Just as in Africa, orders are passed along by the telegraph of living people.”<sup>47</sup> The body of the Black messenger is itself the medium here. It is this self-reflexivity about the connection between patriarchy, memory of slavery and oppression, text and writing that makes the novella central to Caribbean modernism, despite its racist aspects.

In the rare moments when the story’s Black characters are granted their own textual representation, it is emphatically connected to their bodies. Take the iconic speech of a policeman, Toonch: “He gestured swiftly and spoke quick words that sounded birdlike and loud. . . . Nothing but colorful names of paths, low shrubs and hills flew from his mobile mouth. Sharp gestures of his hand through the air had to provide for the connections and link these names into a strategic plan.”<sup>48</sup> The signifier and signified cannot be separated here and are linked to the body of the speaker, which connects the Black man to a presymbolic phase.

The difference between the symbolic and imaginary order therefore coincides rather stereotypically with racial differences.<sup>49</sup> Maria, Frits’s childhood friend and half-sister, is a hybrid figure in that respect. She refuses to be incorporated into the “body of the plantation,” as

Minto points out.<sup>50</sup> After all, Maria went to school and became a teacher, a representative of the symbolic order. She taught local children “who with arms folded carefully in front of them, repeated their monotonous little drills in chorus: ab, bc, cd . . . three four five, one two three,”<sup>51</sup> or at least Frits imagines so: we do not get an insight into Maria’s mind. The children’s voices here bear the alphabet and the numerical series—so their bodies too are part of the many media described in “My Black Sister.” Instead of the iconic manner of speaking of Toonch, these children are initiated into the symbolic order of the alphabet. We also see the body as a medium in regard to the oral narrative tradition on the island, represented by the coachman, about whom Frits recalls, “In his little boy’s suit with knickerbockers, he would sit bobbing alongside Pedritu for hours, who narrated tales about spiders, about princesses who sing in heaven, about the ghost who appears as a white donkey with a blue star between his erect ears.”<sup>52</sup> Here, Pedritu’s body also acts as a carrier of texts, this time particularly those representing the local, oral culture, culminating in their acquisition by Frits.<sup>53</sup> The archiving activities of the young Frits himself are a violent counterpart to the stories of the coachman: he recounts writing girls’ names on the agave plants with a rusty nail: “After a few days a crust came up and the words on the green leaf stood in clear parchment letters. When the agaves were in flower, hummingbirds were seen to vibrate like large butterflies around the blossoms.”<sup>54</sup>

The carvings remind us that nature’s space is also socially produced and filled with politics and ideology. In addition, they evoke associations with the inscription of the human body in the slave trade, when people were branded with the names of their owners. Bodies of Caribbean people became part of an economy in which they were made into objects and merchandise through writing, on skin and also on “parchment.” Writing is thus exposed as a violent act, and brought into opposition with nature. At the same time, such oppositions do not fully apply in this text. The violent inscription in the plant is also an act of creation and recreation, and of recording acts of violence. The act of writing seems to be ambivalent.

### Metafiction after Independence: Astrid Roemer

Self-reflexive and ambivalent critique of writing and the symbolic order as a vehicle of both oppression and emancipation remains a constant theme in modernist Dutch Caribbean literature. This theme can be observed even more poignantly in work by women such as the Surinamese writers Bea Vianen (1935–2019) and Astrid Roemer (1947–). Vianen portrays characters whose eagerness for knowledge and liberation is frustrated by an oppressive and racist culture. In her novels, learning and writing equal leaving or even betraying one's family and country, an act of aggression represented as repulsion and abjection.<sup>55</sup> Entry into the symbolic order through schooling, books, and writing becomes an ambivalent means of achieving autonomy. In the oeuvre of Astrid Roemer this ambivalence toward books, media, letters, and archives is even more explicit, with added emphasis on the entanglement of these media with violent discursive power structures.

Roemer is an author who can be compared to Wilson Harris: they share a dense style, use of myth, intertextuality, and allegory, and write generally complex, nonlinear novels. Roemer, however, employs intertextuality and attention to form more directly to deconstruct discursive and material power relations, especially gendered ones. Having received increased critical attention, readership, and awards in recent years, her work represents the cultural and political history of her native country, all the while questioning the hierarchical structure of language itself. According to Roemer, language is “incestuous”: “So full of coils and lapses. So much penetrated with power abuse and ostracism.”<sup>56</sup> In her as-yet untranslated trilogy, *Onmogelijk moederland* (Impossible motherland, 1996–98), references to Hindu wisdom, European fairy tales, biblical narratives, and Fanta-Akan myth form a web of signification.<sup>57</sup> The novels demonstrate that it is only in this cultural interaction that some kind of understanding of the violent past is established: in the lived language entangled with other textualities, materialities, bodies, and changing environments.<sup>58</sup> Where Vianen places the symbolic order of language and literature in opposition to a corrupted and abject nature, Roemer's texts

try to be part of both realms and to demonstrate their interconnectedness. This holds true especially for the third and last part of the trilogy, *Was getekend* (Was signed, 1998), with a main character who grew up as a foundling in a leper colony and is then raised with European fairy tales by a foster mother from the Netherlands. His name is Pedrick the Third Abacadabra, and if this does not sound enough like a fairy tale, his nickname is “Ilya,” the first syllables of *il y avait une fois* (the French “once upon a time”), indicating that he is a figure made from language. Ilya's foster mother tells him fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen “to teach him to see different versions of reality.”<sup>59</sup> This foundling is typical of those Roemer characters who are formed by discourse, by cultural environment, and (foster) parents rather than by unknown origins. This poststructuralist critique of origin is illustrative of Roemer's search for meanings that are produced in a *trace*. Ilya's story must be understood allegorically and self-reflexively: Roemer's narrative itself has roots in the (hardly idealized) native nature and (orphaned) people of Suriname, on the one hand, and European discursive practices, on the other.

Especially in the second part of the trilogy, *Lijken op liefde* (Looks like love), the influence of material media on human relations and (political) discourses is emphasized.<sup>60</sup> Cora is the elderly wife of a “nature-healer”—note the ambivalence of nature that needs healing itself—who has become complicit in the violent murder of a pregnant Dutch woman by cleaning the crime scene before the police arrived. Her quest for the truth, her own guilt, and the guilt she feels for the perpetrator is interwoven with a fictional national tribunal in Suriname. Language turns out to be the vehicle of lies and deception. At the same time, language emerges as a pathway to confronting and healing national trauma.

When Cora sets out on her journey, she decides to record “spoken letters” for her husband, in the tradition of the oral culture of her native country. The recording and “archiving” of her experiences cause delay: the meaning and the message become unstable, but both are also



possible—through the hermeneutical reader of the letter. We can read her “testimony” as a foreshadowing of the tribunal later in the novel. In this way, Cora (and Roemer) involves her audience in her testimony, making it aware of the highly politically charged space in which the information circulates. As we saw in discussing Debrot’s novella, postcolonial literature is often marked by the discursive representations of the technologies of modernity and of “phallic domination”: motorboats, cars, typewriters, and guns.<sup>61</sup>

Here, the effect of the representation of media is self-reflexive: Like Roemer’s novels, Cora’s recorded travelogue is both personal and public. The oral character of her report to her husband indicates changeability and instability, unlike a written story. However, the technological purpose of the recorder is to register. In this respect, her letters have much in common with the genre of Roemer’s own novels: the meaning is unstable and fluid, but the registration of the material text is fixed. Neither text makes a claim to the truth, but both describe the detours people take to get closer to it. Both the novel and the letters presume a reader or listener, but they are monologic and thus akin to messages in a bottle, without any certainty of arrival. The medium of the recorded letter works self-reflexively and thus mirrors literary meaning-making.

Such representations place Roemer’s oeuvre beyond modernism: the affordances of modernity and its media are questioned in a rather poststructuralist manner. Origin and truth are replaced by the traces and influences of texts and contexts. Narrative emerges as the most suitable medium to critique the discursive nature of the violence of (post)colonial relations.

If we apply the classic European concept of modernism to Dutch-speaking Caribbean literature, we find a body of work that can easily be categorized along similar lines: from the high modernism of Bernardo Ashetu and Cola Debrot, to the avant-garde of John Leefmans and Edgar Cairo (on the latter, see the contribution to this special issue by Thalia Ostendorf), and finally the more postmodern Astrid Roemer. However, such a framework inadequately accounts for the historical and geographical situatedness of the texts: the context of multilingualism, displacement, and trauma. The different obstacles posed by colonial and postcolonial modernity have created a literary culture that is concerned with the position of language and writing in that modernity. If literature as a cultural form is complicit with the patriarchal colonial order that it seeks to critique, it needs to constantly undermine itself. From de Kom’s epistemological critique to Debrot’s questioning of writing as a mechanism of violent oppression, we have ended with Roemer’s deconstruction of discourse as a vehicle of both political corruption and of meaningful healing and connection. Self-reflexivity (metafiction, irony, intertextuality, allegory) as a modernist strategy is pervasive throughout the Dutch Caribbean literary texts of the twentieth century: post from the start.

## Endnotes

- 1 Dave Gunning, "Caribbean Modernism," in Peter Brooker et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 910–25, esp. 911.
- 2 Bart Moore-Gilbert, "Postcolonial Modernisms," in David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar, eds., *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 554.
- 3 Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 4 Gunning, "Caribbean Modernism," 921.
- 5 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 196–97.
- 6 For example, by Wim Rutgers, *Beneden en boven de wind: Literatuur van de Nederlandse Antillen en Aruba* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1996); and Michiel van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur*, 4 vols. (Paramaribo: Okopipi, 2002).
- 7 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 11.
- 8 Gunning, "Caribbean Modernism," 919.
- 9 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 187–88, quoted in Gunning, "Caribbean Modernism."
- 10 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 44.
- 11 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *Diaspora and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 21–33.
- 12 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time" (1975), *Small Axe*, no. 66 (2021): 94.
- 13 Russell, *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries*, 33–34.
- 14 Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," *New Left Review* 209 (1995): 11.
- 15 "Het ontbreken van een officiële spelling en van schoolondericht in deze taal, is voor het hanteren van het Sranan tongo als schrijftaal een ernstige handicap geweest. Het pionierswerk van Koenders en later Bruma, Trefossa, Doornen en Cairo, heeft geen vervolg gekregen in nieuw gepubliceerd proza in het Sranan." Michiel van Kempen, *De Surinaamse literatuur, 1970–1985* (Paramaribo: De Volksboekwinkel, 1987), 24. All translations in this essay are mine unless otherwise indicated.
- 16 In Tessa Leuwsha, "Je taal is je cultuur," in Julien Ignacio, Raoul de Jong, and Michiel van Kempen, eds., *Dat wij zongen: Twintig Caraïbische schrijvers om nooit te vergeten* (Amsterdam: Das Mag, 2022), 143, 156.
- 17 In Leuwsha, "Je taal is je cultuur." The English translation is anonymous and posted at <https://poetryisjustawesome.com/2016/02/10/uma-woman-surinam-poem-blacklivesmatter-hillyes/>.
- 18 "die aanschopten tegen de gezapigheid van een voorgekookt literair nationalisme"; van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur*, 4:564–65.
- 19 Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur*, 4:565.
- 20 Jo Löffel, *Intro* (Paramaribo: Orchid, 1981).
- 21 Cited in Jan Voorhoeve and Ursy M. Lichtveld, *Creole Drum: An Anthology of Creole Literature in Surinam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 183.
- 22 Elleke Boehmer and Frances Gouda, "Postcolonial Studies in the Context of the 'Diasporic' Netherlands," in Elleke Boehmer and Sarah de Mul, eds., *The Postcolonial Low Countries: Literature, Colonialism, and Multiculturalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 25–44, esp. 34.
- 23 Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur*, 4:3.
- 24 Voorhoeve and Lichtveld, *Creole Drum*, 183–84.
- 25 In Voorhoeve and Lichtveld, *Creole Drum*, 186–87.
- 26 "een uitgesproken vorm van zwarte trots en zwart zelfbewustzijn en activisme." Alfred Schaffer, "Met één stap miljoenen mijlen Vooruit," in Ignacio, de Jong, and van Kempen, *Dat wij zongen*, 162.
- 27 Bernardo Ashetu, *Dat ik je liefheb: Gedichten*, edited by Michiel van Kempen (Haarlem, the Netherlands: In de knipscheer, 2011).
- 28 Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur*, 4:526–27.
- 29 Bernardo Ashetu, *Dat ik je liefheb*.
- 30 "Op het eiland kent men het begrip artiest niet eens; je bent hier een man die een boek schrijft; zoals iemand een hondehok timmert, in de trant van: ruim de rommel op, we gaan eten." Wim Rutgers, "De literaire ambiente; literatuur en media," *Bzzlettin* 16, no. 143 (1987): 85.
- 31 Rutgers, "De literaire ambiente," 86.
- 32 Rutgers, "De literaire ambiente," 88.
- 33 Anton de Kom, *We Slaves of Suriname*, translated by David McKay (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2022), 76. "Geen volk kan tot vollen wasdom komen, dat erfelijk met een minderwaardigheidsgevoel belast blijft"; de Kom, *Wij slaven van Suriname* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 1934), 59.
- 34 Guno Jones, "Citizenship Violence and the Afterlives of Dutch Colonialism: Re-reading Anton de Kom," *Small Axe*, no. 70 (2023): 100–122, esp. 101.
- 35 Anton de Kom, *We Slaves of Suriname*, 76. "Het heeft lang geduurd voor ik mijzelf geheel van de obsessie bevrijd had, dat een neger altijd en onvoorwaardelijk de mindere zijn moest van iederen blanke"; de Kom, *Wij slaven van Suriname*, 58.
- 36 Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," 98.
- 37 De Kom, *We Slaves of Suriname*, 93. "Rust en welvaart voor wie? En gekocht met hoeveel bloed, met hoeveel wreedheid, met hoeveel verwoesting!"; de Kom, *Wij slaven van Suriname*, 89.
- 38 De Kom, *We Slaves of Suriname*, 69. "Zoo doorkruist hij in kalmen stap de rijke velden, waar de planten des te beter schijnen te groeien naarmate ze beter met negerbloed bemest zijn"; de Kom, *Wij slaven van Suriname*, 46.
- 39 De Kom, *We Slaves of Suriname*, 58. "Tusschen het geraas der groote stad, tusschen schrijf- en rekenmachines droomen over de gouden volheid van vergane tijden"; de Kom, *Wij slaven van Suriname*, 29.
- 40 De Kom, *We Slaves of Suriname*, 59. "Ook gij moet iets voelen van de wanhoop en het verdriet dier zwarten, weggesleept uit hun woonplaats, ver van hun verwanten, ziek door deining en slechte voeding, vol angst voor hun onbekende bestemming"; de Kom, *Wij slaven van Suriname*, 30.
- 41 Duco van Oostrum, "'Someone Willing to Listen to Me': Anton de Kom's *We Slaves of Suriname* (1934) and the 'We' of Dutch Post-colonial Literature in African American Literary Context," *Dutch Crossing* 44, no. 1 (2019): 45–80, 86.
- 42 Van Oostrum, "Someone Willing to Listen to Me," 48–49.
- 43 Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," 11.
- 44 Cola Debrot, "My Black Sister," in Olga E. Rojer and Joseph E. Aimone, eds., *Founding Fictions of the Caribbean* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 43.
- 45 Cf. Yra van Dijk, "Een kruiwagen vol benzine: Media-technologie in Cola Debrot's *Mijn zuster de Negerin*," *Spiegel der Letteren* 58, no. 4 (2016): 459–86.
- 46 Debrot, "My Black Sister," 28.
- 47 Debrot, "My Black Sister," 27.
- 48 Debrot, "My Black Sister," 27–28.
- 49 Van Dijk, "Een kruiwagen vol benzine."
- 50 Deonne Minto, "Breaking through the Silence: Knowledge, the 'Racial Contract' and the 'Colonial Unconscious' in Cola Debrot's 'My Sister the Negro,'" in *Dutch Crossing* 30, no. 1 (2006): 75.
- 51 Debrot, "My Black Sister," 34.

- 52 Debrot, "My Black Sister," 21.
- 53 Rutgers, *Beneden en boven de wind*, 34.
- 54 Debrot, "My Black Sister," 14.
- 55 Cf. Éric Morales-Franceschini, "Tropics of Abjection: Figures of Violence and the Afro-Caribbean Semiotic," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 55, no. 4 (2019): 512–26.
- 56 Astrid H. Roemer, *Zolang ik leef ben ik niet dood* (Amsterdam: Aspekt, 2004), 80.
- 57 Astrid H. Roemer, *Onmogelijk moederland* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2016).
- 58 Yra van Dijk and Ghanima Kowsoleea, "A Central Voice in Caribbean Literature: Media and Memory in the Novels of Astrid Roemer," *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / New West Indian Guide* 96, no. 1/2 (2022): 29–54.
- 59 Roemer, *Onmogelijk moederland*, 434.
- 60 Astrid H. Roemer, *Lijken op liefde* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1997).
- 61 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 13.

# Faith Smith

## Reading Lessons

**Faith Smith** teaches at Brandeis University. Her research interests are in the intellectual, cultural and intimate histories of the Caribbean and the African Diaspora, from the late nineteenth century to the present. She edited *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* (2011), and published *Strolling Through the Ruins: The Caribbean's Non-sovereign Modern in the Early Twentieth Century* (2023). Recent essays include "Cultural Criticism and Its Generations: The Achievement of Maureen Warner-Lewis," *Small Axe* (2023), and "Standpipes, Chimneys and Memorialization in the Caribbean," *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2024). She is working on "Dread-Kin," a project on Caribbean fiction and visual culture in our contemporary moment.

“How will you have your egg? The ostrich egg which this cook will serve to her master’s family is equal to 24 chicken eggs.” This is the caption of a photograph included in the June 1931 coverage of Emperor Haile Selassie’s November 1930 coronation, and of Ethiopia more broadly, by the US periodical *National Geographic Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> In the black-and-white photograph, a young woman with close-cropped hair and wearing an ankle-length, long-sleeved dress looks directly at the camera; she is holding a plate or tray with a large white egg that seems almost luminous; behind her is a natural backdrop of what appears to be cacti. If by “modernism” we mean the dispositions and aesthetic practices from about, let us say, the 1880s to the 1960s, that account for and also embody startling and imaginative distillations of fragmentation, dislocation, and novelty, then we could understand Caribbean modernism, or Caribbean investments in modernism, as simultaneously fully embedded in, misread as peripheral to, anticipating, and even engendering these practices and the conditions that generated them.<sup>2</sup> These texts stage, require, and are themselves driven by the imperative to read and reread events and objects and social subjects across different temporalities, in relation to one another, and also without recourse to the expectation that they will always be read in such relation.

In attending to the Caribbean’s purchase on modernism, this essay has multiple nodal points, including claims on Ethiopia that are Black diasporic and global in character.<sup>3</sup> Claims on Ethiopia discussed in what follows might also be specifically Caribbean; or specifically Jamaican refracted through Rastafari (or vice versa); or they might be *national*, rather than either global or Black diasporic. Another nodal point is photography, a medium of modernism’s convening of imperial, anthropological, realist, and avant-garde agendas that is particularly fraught for racialized and colonized subjects. Caribbean people’s encounters with one another, often in the context of their back-breaking labor across various venues, is another preoccupation, insofar as these encounters provide resources for modernist read-

ing. Black women’s presumed supporting and supportive roles as facilitators of a (national, religious, racial) group’s access to a prosperous future is another interest of this essay.

With my title, “Reading Lessons,” I want to signal the layers of signification and literacy necessary to appreciate Caribbean people’s understanding of ourselves as inserted into modernity, as well as the “modernisms” that have become canonized in relation to circuits of texts identified with metropolitan centers (Paris, New York, London) of presses, galleries, museums, and universities. These and other institutions have brokered the definitions of modernism and narrated the process by which “spiritual” or “mundane” objects and practices are transmuted into avant-garde (or otherwise interesting) art, poetry, narrative, or choreography, whereas the communities associated with these practices and objects have not been viewed as artistic participants in and adjudicators of modernism. In the Caribbean we are implicated in these processes, and in this essay I will use our investment in signs such as the photograph with which I opened to explore this. If the African continent has had a particular relationship to canonical modernism, for instance, the Caribbean’s relationship to the African continent, shaped by historical circumstances including enslavement and post-abolition African indentureship, means that “Africa” is the sign of a cultural inheritance that, reviled or celebrated, is often understood in terms of a static source or origin. Furthermore, all the region’s people, whether understood to be descendants of First Nation, European, African, Asian, or other communities, are marked by this presumed African entanglement, whether this means having to deny or attempt to lay claim to this proximity. Finally, the search for pure origins that has sometimes driven the ethnographical projects that have fed canonical modernism’s appetites has meant that places such as the Caribbean are deeply disappointing (neither Western enough for sociologists nor “native” enough for the “savage slot” of anthropologists, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has put it), but also that in those very centers (New York, London, and Paris) of modernism’s sometimes most recognizable and



demeaning modes of incorporation of the “savage slot,” Caribbean people have sometimes functioned as palatable “Western” proxies for “Africa.”<sup>4</sup>

The 1931 photo is bound up in not only the primitivizing modes of modernism but also those global Black diasporic claims on Ethiopia that preceded the emperor’s coronation and that have arguably never ceased, even as the circumstances of such claims may have shifted from place to place or from time to time. This means, among other things, that we may get access to what we cherish through violent processes that intensify our and others’ degradation; that our reading and interpretation is always fraught (liable to participate in demeaning readings of Africa and African people, for instance) as well as imaginative; and that we understand that often *our* reading is assumed to be not only unsophisticated and superstitious but also insubordinate, risking arrest. This also means that the time period of a particular practice of reading matters, even when this may be narrated as inconsequential. Toward the end of my reflections here I will use recent novels that refer to the era of this photograph, or to the photograph specifically (although these realist and postmodern novels are neither modernist nor necessarily interested in modernism), because I think that they ask us to revisit questions about cultural literacy and genealogy: in short, who is considered fit to read and imagine. The simultaneous global and local reading in a moment claimed for modernism invites us to see how Caribbean people were both fully engaged in and yet also not wholly defined by, on the one hand, modernist histories that sometimes concentrate on particular artistic strategies instead of migratory and other currents that contribute to cultural literacy, or, on the other hand, genealogies of Caribbean nationalism that discount both the different kinds of claims on places such as Ethiopia made by Caribbean people, and regional and global migrations that are sometimes illegible because they exceed national boundaries.

In her study of Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé’s 1976 novel *Heremakhonon*, VèVè Clark uses the term “diaspora literacy” to name “the ability to read and comprehend the discours-

es of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective, where [particular names] represent mnemonic devices releasing learned traditions,” and in which such literacy, “more than an intellectual exercise,” becomes “a skill that requires social and political development generated by lived experiences.”<sup>5</sup> For my purposes in this essay, the mnemonic would be something like “Emperor Selassie” or “egg.” These are signs that may not mean the same thing across different time periods and locations (or even social groups within the same location); that share and also exceed “African diasporic” registers; that may have specific Caribbean registers, and that also require us to remember that “Caribbean” is itself a capacious sign; and finally, that are unstable, in Brent Edwards’s sense of diasporic affiliation as provisional, contrived, risky, hopeful—important because of rather than in spite of presumed success or failure.<sup>6</sup> We can place these readings of and by diasporic contexts and subjects beside other reading lessons, as when Tsitsi Ella Jaji urges readings of the African continent that assume its dynamism rather than a stasis that positions it as *past* in relation to some Black diasporic location’s march into the future. For Jaji, African modernism has to be understood as “collaboratively, coevally, and continually forged.”<sup>7</sup>

These reading lessons are also mindful of the way that, as in the 1931 photograph, social subjects who are gendered female both share with others and appear to be marked in distinctive ways by embeddedness in discourses of fertility, disinheritance, shame, service, burden. The presumably Amharic-speaking Ethiopian in this photograph may or may not be aware of how she is scripted into continental African, global Black diasporic, anticolonial and decolonizing, primitivist-modernist, or any number of other contexts. It is the kind of photograph (Black juxtaposed with white, woman juxtaposed with geometrical object, caption suggestive of social hierarchy) that was being claimed for modernist reading in the early twentieth century, even if as an “ethnographic” partner to a corresponding photograph claimed for “art.” The image allows me to explore what it has meant to claim Ethiopia as just one instance of what it means to read diasporically, from afar; what it means to be put to the

service of modernist projects; and what it means for women to choose (or be expected, or required) to hold up or hold on to a community's archive of objects of enlightenment, nourishment, protection.

Looking at the 1931 photograph, we could consider what it means to read or to *read for* "Africa," and also to read and to be read within and across the continent. In a photograph beside the one of the young woman, a very young man, perhaps a teenager, bears a rifle, with the sort of caption, "proud of his warlike heritage," that places the periodical's spread in line with images taken by colonial administrators, ethnographers, and others across the continent from at least the late nineteenth century. These photographs and captions assisted in the codification of ethnic "types" that authenticated and naturalized the imperial project while also separating the implied viewer from being identified with the subject of the photograph: perhaps this young man *was* "warlike" and proud of it, but armed European troops across the continent, or US Marines occupying Haiti were not so designated in corresponding captions. In the previous two decades, the *National Geographic Magazine* had shifted its identity as the journal of an academic society to a more public-facing periodical, in this way extending the work of those "minor figures" and "surrogate native informants" represented by the colonial administrators, missionaries, and others whose reports, travel writing, and sometimes also photographs, from beyond the sphere of the increasingly professionalized university, facilitated the transfer of knowledge-making among the colonial machinery, university, state-sponsored and university museums, and a public arena that included the readers of such periodicals.<sup>8</sup> Such a circuit facilitated both violent access to communities and their cultural property across the continent and the protocols of taste that would transform this property into objects claimed for modernism.

But perhaps the photograph of this young woman, or of the young man with a rifle (or of "Two Amharic Belles of the Capital City," an image of two women with parasols whose

"heavily-battered pompadours" resemble the Afros that would be recognizable to a global audience in the late 1960s, but that were also in keeping with hairstyles of Ethiopian women in photographs taken during the Italian invasion in the 1940s), was also read in relation to those taken by itinerant photographers, or the studio photographers and their assistants who would become more commonplace a decade or so later. If the audience implied by the readership and address of *National Geographic Magazine* was one thing, what would audiences in her own society, or across the Horn, or across the continent, have understood as the set of meanings to assign to her—and not only because they "understood" her, but also because they understood her as *other* in particular ways, whether this meant she was reviled, appreciated, or elicited indifference?<sup>9</sup> Depending on what constituencies would have had access to *National Geographic Magazine*, we might imagine how this young woman's image would have been read in the context of her own society or those across the continent—what various communities of African readers might have made of the fact that the egg she was carrying was assumed to be connected to food, of the fact that she was unaccompanied, of the way she was dressed, or of her ability to command the attention of (and look straight into the lens of) a foreign photographer, particularly given that the caption appeared to define her in terms of her labor for others. What might have been the repercussions for her of this exposing event?

As part of an extensive spread of mostly black-and-white photographs, the color portraits of the "Newly Crowned Monarchs of Ethiopia," saturated in red and gold, must have been particularly stunning, and no less so because they appeared in a US periodical depicting a significant moment of African sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, any positive coverage by news media globally would have been countered by other kinds of accounts, in the Caribbean media landscape at least, that sought to diminish or ridicule the emperor's coronation, or, more generally, the prospect of African claims to sovereignty that exceeded the auspices of European and US imperial rule. Reminding us that reading is not restricted to those who are

textually literate, Jaji discusses South African women readers of glossy magazines a generation or so later, in the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> She coins the term “sheen reading” as a way of accounting for their nonelite consumption, with *sheen* evoking both the “glowing” and “glistening” body prized by these particular readers (a preference that US African American and other entrepreneurs recognized and capitalized on in the products they advertised in such magazines) and the “smoothly functioning daily life” that women were expected to provide for their families and their communities.<sup>12</sup> Jaji also uses “reading sheen” to refer to women’s consumption of a range of media directed at them during and after the Second World War.

Such reading expansively incorporates the appreciation of a multiplicity of typefaces, photographs, and line images that accommodate different kinds of literacies and tastes. These glossy magazines were destined to be passed quickly to the next reader or disposed of in the rubbish bin, “yet, a page torn from its binding and affixed to a wall [became] a timeless secular icon removed from the temporal bounds of its original serialized appearance.”<sup>13</sup>

For Jaji, this wall decoration did not imply an idealized investment in the periodical’s glossy realities, out of reach of the reader. Rather, the torn page deepened the sense of precarity of the magazine’s Black South African readers, whose lives were marked by inadequate amenities and the knowledge that they could be forcibly removed from their current location at any time; for them, the torn, glossy page could elicit nothing but skepticism.<sup>14</sup> Jaji reminds us to connect the consumption of images such as the 1931 photograph of a young woman bearing an egg to multiple communities of spectators and desiring subjects, and to imagine pages removed from a magazine adorning the walls of a home, becoming part of a scrapbook of treasured images, or being discarded. That is to say, incorporated into other circuits of “learned traditions” and “lived experiences” (to borrow VèVè Clark’s terms) besides the magazine itself.

Whatever South African women readers two decades earlier would have thought of the photograph of a young Ethiopian woman with an egg, they were specifically courted by these magazines, while *National Geographic Magazine*’s target audience may be surmised from its advertising: “Indian Detours” offering limousine tours from California to New Mexico to visit “colorful Indian pueblos”; line drawings of white women and children in advertising for transatlantic cruises by the International Mercantile Marine Company (the names of whose vessels, the White Star line and the Red Star line, are an indication of how Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Line would have been perceived); white women playing tennis in advertisements for Schrafft’s chocolate, marketed as an antidote for lethargy: “pure candy for quick energy.”<sup>15</sup> Readers were thus invited to get into a car or on a boat with a camera and experience the racial and cultural other firsthand, or to enjoy a stimulating vacation, or both. These advertisements presume a readership interested in pursuing the same cultural experiences as social scientists did, and perhaps also participating in the adjudication of what was “artistic” about the objects that they were bound to bring back home with them.

Reading a 1931 photograph of a woman holding an egg in tandem with an image such as Man Ray’s *Noire et blanche*, a black-and-white photograph first published in French *Vogue* in May 1926, allows us to think about a certain kind of modernist staging and reading that has privileged the placing of presumably discrepant images side by side. In this latter image, the head of a white woman lies horizontally on a surface, alongside a West African Baule mask that she is holding upright. The use of African objects to convey inaccessibility or serenity, the closed or inscrutable eyes of model and mask, the juxtaposition of ovoid forms, as well as of verticality and horizontality, the contrast between the mask’s blackness and Blackness and the model’s whiteness: these are some of the features that would become identified with canonical accounts of modernism, particularly in their surrealist and primitivist dimensions.<sup>16</sup> Accompanying this photograph in the magazine is commentary referring to the “calm transparent egg” of a woman’s face mired in “primitive nature.” Both

dreaded point of departure and inevitable portal of return, this “place full of mystery” is a stage through which “the species” passed—“*through women*”—“before becoming today the evolved white creature.”<sup>17</sup>

Here the human race, racialized as white, has moved away from but is also drawn toward a prior evolutionary stage that is presumably identified with the mask’s actual and symbolic reference to nonwhite people who are or ought to be subject to imperial rule. White women are both more open and more vulnerable to this place of mystery, apparently, and we could infer that this gendered openness has to be *policed*, in addition to being admired and imitated.<sup>18</sup> This mask is a sign of savagery that has justified ongoing imperial rule (and therefore the theft of the object by Europeans in the first place) but that is here being reinserted into a modernist context in which it enlivens the overrationalization and ennui of viewers imagined as white. It is savage-hip and savage-restorative, rather than savage-criminalized, though only in the context of this kind of curated proximity to whiteness.

In the context of the *National Geographic Magazine*, the photograph of the young woman with the egg marks the difference between the presumed reader of the magazine and the purportedly unevolved cultural location that belies Ethiopia’s sovereignty and that justifies the European imperial project across the African continent. The caption stresses the social hierarchies within Ethiopia (“her master’s family”), understood as dramatically different from the society and household of the presumed reader—as dramatic a difference between the size of an ostrich egg and of a chicken egg cooked to order in the reader’s domestic circumstances, free of serfdom. The captions of both photographs connect women to eggs; their labor, fertility, and their very bodies are implicated in the representation of a racialized group’s capacity or incapacity to be modern, autonomous, sovereign.

We could imagine that Caribbean readers of this issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, wherever in the world they happened to be, may or may not have connected an ostrich egg borne on a tray to the luxury of eggs for breakfast as a marker of class, or to one more sign of the (wondrous or wasteful) excesses of a sovereign. In at least one regional Caribbean newspaper, the news of Emperor Selassie’s coronation was tucked away on page 18, while the front page carried a photograph of Britain’s Prince of Wales flying his own aircraft, as well as news that Prince George, the “fourth and youngest son” of the British king and queen, would soon be made a duke.<sup>19</sup> The following year, there was a report (with what appeared to be a derisive headline) about a parade organized by the United Negro Improvement Association in Harlem, New York, featuring large photographs of the emperor, and of the UNIA’s leader, Marcus Garvey; and readers also learned of the “ten thousand warriors” in Ethiopia who “banqueted” on the raw meat that was reported to be “the most delectable of foods to the native Ethiopian,” in a celebration marking the first anniversary of the emperor’s coronation.<sup>20</sup> From time to time, readers were also reminded that the emperor had not yet kept his promise to abolish slavery.<sup>21</sup> In this context, the emperor trailed behind the political and moral leadership represented by British royalty and other European figures who had led the world in abolishing slavery, and whose imperial violence was not violent but the necessary instantiation of law and order. To read the emperor with admiration, or in terms of divinity, as some did around the world, was to read against the grain.

Since eggs are deeply implicated in Caribbean traditions of spiritual protection inherited from multiple ethnocultural sources across the African continent, the photograph of a young woman holding a tray with an egg could have been interpreted in terms of spiritual work made inappropriately public by the periodical: the feeding of ancestors or *lwa*; the rendering of *minkisi* packets (or blown eggshells themselves) into containers of potency; the placing of eggshells at the doorway of a home in the occupant’s absence, to repel invaders. Across the Caribbean these were part of a vocabulary of powerful signs that required vigilant inter-



pretation in day-to-day living—a cultural literacy that for generations had made Afro- and Indo-Caribbean people vulnerable to criminal charges. This was a moral universe in which authorities scoffed at and feared this spiritual power, and in which, since everyday objects could be transformed into (protective or destructive) spiritual agents, the possession of any number of objects could be deemed to be criminalizable.<sup>22</sup>

But like other signs, eggs had many layers of meaning. Visiting ethnographers reported that Jamaicans, for instance, pelted eggs at trees or dreamed of them for reasons that were spiritually meaningful; but an idiomatic expression could also be comprehensible in general parlance *because* of its spiritual resonances, which also meant that over time spiritual vocabulary had become woven into quotidian contexts.<sup>23</sup> Eggs were available for literal as well as metaphorical meaning-making, and in the hands of a skillful reader and storyteller, they could be put to the service of parables about colorism—as when Zora Neale Hurston surmised, in her 1938 book about her visit to the region, that roosters must lay pink eggs, since Jamaicans’ stories of their ancestral connection to white men bypassed African-descended women.<sup>24</sup> In such stories, the idea of the Black woman’s integration into a community’s assessment of both its inheritance and its legacy appeared to be so fraught that it was necessary to erase her, in the *narration* of its genealogy, at least.

As with eggs, so with whiteness, or masks—they could be read with cultural meanings specific to the Caribbean, or more generally.<sup>25</sup> As we have seen, masks entered Parisian spaces, for example, as a result of colonial expeditions and expositions of the turn of the century, as part of an intensely violent phase of imperial expansion that included the African continent. I imagine that these masks and other objects may have adorned the dormitories or salons of Caribbean students in Paris, who were probably reading *Vogue* and *National Geographic Magazine*, in addition to the more learned periodicals that they read or edited, and with which we have tended to identify them.<sup>26</sup> Being misread as object rather than artist, or

having a keen sense of imperial violence, or being aware of inheriting a rich history of masks and masquerade would not have prevented Caribbean people, including artists, in the early twentieth century, from participating in a thrilling shock of the new that was implicated in this violence, and that rendered them “co-workers in the kingdom of culture” with their white European and North American counterparts, even when they understood that the use of masks in *their* work could be attributed to natural or atavistic inclinations, or relatedly when they found themselves objectified in white artists’ references to them or to objects identified as “African.”<sup>27</sup>

We can imagine Caribbean people of that era collecting masks, using them in their own works of art, or assessing their deployment in a photograph in French *Vogue*, and therefore see them as purveyors alongside artists from all over the world, even as they are also drawing on expansive cultural literacies about masks derived from long-standing traditions of masquerade across the Americas, including the Caribbean and the US South, in which African-descended and African-adjacent communities participating in Jonkonnu and Carnival don actual or symbolic masks related to West African Egwugwu, Egungun, and other traditions; and in which masks and masquerade paraphernalia are made for a Carnival season, after which they are recycled or retired. Carnival traditions involve disenfranchised communities’ parodying of the attempts by their social superiors to mimic their movements, and also involve “respectable” forces calling for Carnival celebrations to be reformed or brought to an end. These are strategies and consequences of masking that pull in different directions.

Caribbean artists self-consciously stage their consumption of the very canonical terms of modernism that sometimes exclude them, and they also ironize and rehistoricize them. Thus Claude McKay’s Haitian character, Ray, in the 1928 novel *Home to Harlem*, searches for new “patterns of words achieving form” to cope with a postwar malaise brought on by a consciousness of living in the “vast international cemetery” of a new century: “What were men

making of words now? During the war he had been startled by James Joyce . . . Sherwood Anderson . . . D. H. Lawrence.”<sup>28</sup> Here, an upper-middle-class Caribbean migrant fallen on hard times in the United States, the very country that was at that moment occupying Haiti, invokes white British and US writers now claimed as canonical modernists. Ray is constantly ironized by his close proximity to the working-class characters whose raucous and precarious living energizes and inspires him, and also exposes his and others’ elitist tendency to mine their speech, dances, and ethical codes—their very being—for the elevated poem, novel, or political treatise rather than to see them as imaginative theorists of their own condition. Returning from fighting for the Allies in Europe, these working-class subjects introduce French kissing and French suits to their neighbors, who constitute the tens of thousands of largely Black diasporic subjects concentrated in Harlem, some of whom are fleeing the terrors of lynching in the US South.

Self-conscious about their status as exotic racial objects, Ray and others participate fully in the circuit of objects and signs that renders them both consumer and consumed. They are excited by the *chinoiserie*, African masks, and other objects identified with what is being codified as avant-garde, while understanding that this includes “Black” speech, blackface, and other elements distilled from the minstrel stage—startling and new in the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, perhaps, but apt to be read as lacking in irony, or as *natural*, rather than self-conscious and strategic, when they as nonwhite artists deploy these discourses.<sup>29</sup> Imani Owens suggests that we note the parallel between Eric Walrond’s *Tropic Death* (1926) and one of canonical modernism’s most representative texts, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), suggested by the fact that they shared a publishing house attuned to a “disillusionment with modernity,” but that we also note that Eliot’s “diffuse, general anxiety” differs from the specificity of Walrond’s indictment of the imperial machinations in Colón’s killing fields as well as in the Caribbean landscapes from which his fictional characters have traveled, and differs as well from Walrond’s interest in noting these characters’ resistance.<sup>30</sup>

In Colón, Panama; Limón, Costa Rica; eastern Cuba; and other spaces, migrants from Haiti, St. Kitts, Barbados, British Guiana, Jamaica, and elsewhere confronted each other in new ways and learned each other’s curses and endearments, as well as those of their US southern neighbors and their Spanish-speaking neighbors and hosts. They created new meanings of communal Blackness or of multiracial Caribbeanness, for example, even as they mobilized imperial passports to prove that they were different from each other. These migrants would shake up the territories to which they sometimes returned with their dissenting projects of sovereignty, often to suffer their own demise at the hands of the colonial state or their own communities. Look to Colón and Limón, not Kingston, says Lara Putnam, in a reading lesson that invites us to parse *rege/regge/reggae* in those migrant Central American crossroads rather than from within a specific island territory, and also to see that “Colon, Limón and Santiago de Cuba” constituted “a supranational black public sphere, within which Afro–North Americans and Afro-Caribbeans spoke to each other literally and figuratively, read the same papers, and danced to overlapping arrays of musical styles.”<sup>31</sup> Following them back to their homelands when some of them returned, Putnam cautions against seeing their rural spaces as “instinctive” rather than cosmopolitan, as somehow less hip than their counterparts in cities such as Port-au-Prince or Port of Spain; Putnam points out that migration, seaports, and newspapers rendered these communities fully tuned in to the territory, the region, the world.

When Benito Mussolini sent troops into Ethiopia in 1935, it sparked a global protest movement that included the Caribbean, and that built on the earlier dissent of returning migrants such as Leonard Howell, deported from the United States in the early 1930s, tried for sedition in the eastern parish of St. Thomas, Jamaica, and then imprisoned in Kingston for speaking to large crowds about Emperor Selassie’s spiritual and political authority, and encouraging them to concentrate on “King Ras Tafari, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of Judah,” instead of the king of England, when they sang the British national

anthem at the conclusion of these meetings.<sup>32</sup> Protesting Italy's imperial moves in Ethiopia, calypsonians in Trinidad crooned the "Abyssinian Lament" or "Mussolini the Bully." In poems, petitions, and other forms of protest Trinidadians sought to enlist to fight on behalf of Ethiopians, refused to unload ships connected to Italy on Port of Spain's docks, and reconceived their own relations to each other by founding pan-African associations, calling for "unity" between Trinidadians of African and Asian descent, and testing the *classed* limits of "Black" Trinidadian modes of advocacy for Ethiopia. The Marxist Negro Welfare Social Cultural Association held "Hands-Off Abyssinia" meetings, the Afro-West Indian League, and the Committee of Friends in Ethiopia also organized, while the activist Elma François bypassed the British secretary of state to present the League of Nations with a resolution declaring that "in the last War we fought for the white race" but this time "we will fight for ourselves."<sup>33</sup> These popular demands on Ethiopia's behalf preceded by just a few years some of the most powerful expressions of dissent across (at least) the British Caribbean, with strikes and other protests that have ultimately become part of the narration of political federation and independence in the 1950s and 1960s in the British Caribbean.

Recent fiction and nonfiction return us to the claims that Caribbean people have made on Ethiopia, as part of a meditation on the violent consequences of the gendered and sexual identities that we have inherited. Sometimes these texts invoke the mid-1966 visit of Haile Selassie to newly independent Jamaica, as if wishing to reclaim the decade's significance—for one Caribbean territory, at least—from its inevitable temporal marker as the beginning of political independence from the United Kingdom, for an alternative accounting of political and personal sovereignty.<sup>34</sup> Maisy Card's novel *These Ghosts Are Family* uses this event as a stage for one character's reluctant immersion in a classed Blackness she has been taught to rebuke, as she loses herself in a crowd of exuberant and generous Rastafari on the day of the emperor's arrival, while Safiya Sinclair opens her meditation on her own fraught relationship to Rastafari patriarchy with an account of the important psychic and cultural moment

represented by the emperor's visit.<sup>35</sup> Two other recent narratives focus solely or partly on Ethiopia itself, including the figure of Emperor Selassie, as if to suggest that returning to the 1930s and 1940s may offer us lessons for rereading and reformulating a complex inheritance.

Marcia Douglas's *The Marvellous Equations of the Dread: A Novel in Bass Riddim* is set in Jamaica, England, and Ethiopia, and moves freely across multiple presents, from the time of initial European conquest in the Caribbean to what appears to be around the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> The Half Way Tree clock in a central location of metropolitan Kingston functions as a sort of *potomitan*—that place where the *lwa* enter, and the mambos are gathered, and where it is possible for Bob Marley to come face to face with Emperor Selassie, as multiple temporalities collide with each other. In the novel characters must confront memories of extraordinary violence, though they do not always realize that they are experiencing the consequences of an earlier (or future) loss. For one first-person narrator, for instance, a stranger's touch activates a memory of her mother washing her hair in the river, "oiling and twisting it as we sat on a rock in the sun," finally enabling her to counter the memory of a Sunday school teacher who cut off her locks when she was twelve and burned them in front of the class: "'Rasta filthiness,' she said. 'I was so shame.'"<sup>37</sup>

Ethiopian American Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019), bookended by the "present" of 1974, when young people have taken to the streets to protest Emperor Selassie's regime, is set in wartime Ethiopia, 1935–41, when a determined Italian offensive faces off with Ethiopians preparing to defend themselves, as they confront their gendered and classed differences in the process of communal militarization.<sup>38</sup> Even as the Italian army is shown to be ruthless and racist in its determination to recover lost national "manhood" after previous military encounters with Ethiopia, both Italian military manhood and Ethiopian manhood are shown to have violent repercussions for Ethiopian women. Furthermore, sexual violence

wielded against women in Ethiopian and Italian camps is shown to be continuous with the “normal” sexual violence that women face, whether as wives or as servants in cross-class households; rape is a function of wartime *and* peacetime.

In both novels, the figure of the emperor is portrayed in proximity to discourses of paralysis; in *The Shadow King* he is in exile in the United Kingdom listening to *Aïda* while Ethiopians are at war, for instance, and in *Marvellous Equations* he is a frail and vulnerable stroller on Jamaican streets. Both novels use photographs to prompt us to think about the archival practices that allow us to reanimate the past. In *The Shadow King* photographs are objects associated with family inheritance—at least one elite Ethiopian family cherishes family photos as objects of great value, in much the same way that a servant in this household, Hirut, both values the rifle given to her by her family and is forced to submit it to the war effort to demonstrate her patriotism as well as her subjugation to her employers. Photography is part of Ethiopians’ experience of captivity, as the Italians document the imprisonment, torture, and killing of their captives. After her own violent incarceration in an Italian camp, Hirut reluctantly agrees to keep the effects of the prison photographer, including photographs of her own degradation, presumably until he can collect them in the future of 1974. This means that she is presiding over an archive that represents her own and others’ violation. What is the cost of this archival caretaking? Photographs also play a role just outside of the frame of the world of the novel, with photographs of Ethiopian women on the frontispiece, and after the acknowledgements, that are part of a collection that Mengiste herself has amassed, and that access a war which, on the one hand, Italians would rather not recall as a record of their imperial aggression, and which, on the other hand, has erased female warriorhood as a legacy of wartime Ethiopia.

While the emperor is not revered in *The Shadow King* but is portrayed in the contexts of a patriarchal and elitist system, and of his exile to the United Kingdom during the invasion,

*The Marvellous Equations of the Dread* combines a critique of his reign and his personal shortcomings with the deep admiration of Jamaican Rastas for his symbolic power. Since the novel centers Rastafari and the Black working-class constituency of which it is a part, it privileges their capacity to think deeply and move complexly through the world, and therefore to create, against great odds, a way of countering anti-Black violence over many generations, as wielded by imperial and colonial authorities but also among Black people, including in quotidian and familial contexts. Finding the means to admire Blackness, including the reverence for a flawed African monarch, is illustrative of the depth of time (epochal and shape-shifting) that is required to comprehend the violence that each generation yields, and the reserves of wisdom and strength required to withstand this violence and practice this comprehension.

Photographs become part of the way that Black Jamaicans in particular are able to redeem the violent weight of history, and we find them grappling with the wonder of seeing images of Emperor Selassie. The novel also includes photographs of the emperor—greeting one of his lions, for instance—and these share photographic space with archival images of early twentieth-century Jamaica that are accompanied by transformative captions inviting us to see what is not visible: “Look good,” instructs the photograph of elite white Jamaicans enjoying a picnic, urging us to reread the space they are occupying: “Here the women are—under the spot where a boy’s feet danced.”<sup>39</sup> In an extraordinary moment, Sistah Vaughan, one of the novel’s characters (it is her daughter, Leenah, who will be so traumatized by having her hair chopped off that she will forget her mother’s name) recounts the experience of being handed a box of “mildew and stink magazines full with wood louse,” among which is a copy of the 1931 *National Geographic Magazine* featuring the emperor’s coronation and Ethiopia.<sup>40</sup> Not only is this someone else’s discarded archive—that of the postmistress—but Sistah Vaughan has spent her childhood reading everything from sardine tins to the material pasted on her father’s wall, including phrases he has underlined, such as “Look to Africa for



the crowning of a Black King.” This is an intellectual formation that has trained her to look for golden nuggets everywhere and anywhere, and that has countered any information she would have received in a colonial classroom: “When I was a child, no cow jump over the moon for me, no, only Africa and the Black Star line.”

Sistah Vaughan recalls the wonder of seeing photographs of the emperor in the periodical, but she is especially taken by the photograph of the young woman and the egg, and she has her own unit of measurement for the egg’s size: “the egg big like a movie obeah-ball in her hands. I look at that egg and ponder my future.” In this novel in which sexual surveillance is constant, not only can she feel her mother’s suspicious gaze on her while she is enthralled by the image, but this scene of reading quickly opens out into a vision of a prospective suitor who shapeshifts into the emperor, a series of attempts by her mother meant to exorcise her daughter’s premature sexuality, and the arrival of another suitor, a few months later, who appears with a photograph of the emperor around his neck, and with whom she becomes pregnant with Leenah in a few months, before deciding to convert to Rastafari.

These actions are remembered and recounted as a product of Sistah Vaughan’s own agency—not that of the postmistress, or her father, or her mother, though each has had a hand in the kind of archive she can access, and the cultural literacies she has cultivated. If the photograph can be read as primitivizing a cultural other (obviously a reading that by now it should be clear this essay endorses) it is also crucial to appreciate how Sistah Vaughn and other Black people make use of the image in their own archival practices, and their own ways of knowing and seeing. Indeed, Sistah Vaughan exclaims, about the person holding the egg, “And Jah be my judge, she look just like Mama.” Her own modernist practices, honed in the reading of all kinds of texts in all kinds of locations, allow her to find herself and her kin in *National Geographic Magazine*. She may very well discern ideas of potentiality, spiritual warfare, and protection associated with eggs, but that she names a *movie*’s

obeah-ball, which could reflect the sort of lurid reading of Black spiritual practice on offer in Hollywood films, suggests a reading practice that is layered, catholic, up for anything. Sistah Vaughan does not appear to see the Black subject arrested by the photographic gaze, or rather, she does not see *only* that, but possibility, including her own maternal genealogy. This could also mean she understands that she does not have the luxury of scripting herself outside of a violent gaze, that the negotiation of some semblance of freedom or relief necessarily happens *within* the context of such violence.

To read texts that revisit the reign of Emperor Selassie in our present moment is to take for granted the ways the Rastafari movement (as a major conduit of the affirmation of Black personhood and agency, and of the African continent as politically, culturally, and civilizationally significant if not superior to a colonial order that persecuted it ruthlessly) made Blackness available as a racialized identity for Jamaicans to claim. By the early 1970s, visual and sonic cultural forms associated with Rastafari would have a strong global appeal that encouraged the Jamaican elite to change its tune about the group’s perceived unruliness.<sup>41</sup> While Rastafari is not reducible to working-class Jamaican Blackness of whatever ideological register, or even to Garveyism, Bedwardism, or other challenges to the state made in anticolonial, raced, and class terms, it has drawn from while also contesting (and being contested by) these elements, and its spiritual and aesthetic codes have rendered it arguably the most compelling of a rich and complex tradition of insurgent thought and cultural formation. Today, our horizons are not necessarily (or at all) shaped by the anticipation of radical change, or even the project of the nation. And Deborah Thomas points out that, whereas Rastafari used to “mark the limits of citizenship” in Jamaica, it is no longer “a threat to citizenship and nationalist integrity”—a reminder that we go back differently each time that we attend to the past.<sup>42</sup>

Returning to the past, we are still figuring out the contours of freedom, even as our faith in particular institutions and strategies, or in expectations of transformation, may be different.

Caribbean literary critics describing our present moment note the representation of the terror of Black life as an unchanging same from the era of enslavement, available for neither “recovery nor representation” (as novels of an earlier moment, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, could be read as offering in the US context); or they have noted that the Caribbean is particularly suited to nonrealist and speculative models, and to theoretical physics.<sup>43</sup>

To read the 1930s and 1940s from here is to be aware of the experience of making what feel like the same claims on the state in multiple cycles over several generations: Caribbean migrants to the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s were deported or threatened with deportation around 2012, as national and imperial discomfort with their presence in the United Kingdom found new contexts in post-9/11 anxieties about terrorism.<sup>44</sup> And recent calls for the repatriation of objects from European museums to Nigeria, Greece, and other locations are repeating demands made in an earlier era that were successfully quashed by museums.<sup>45</sup> To read from here is also to be self-aware about the burden of the register in which earlier generations made their claims on the state or each other: one of Jamaican novelist Erna Brodber’s fictional characters is stifled by the respectable expectations of parents who feel the pressure of being judged by neighbors, and she uses metaphorical language that should be familiar to us by now: “I was their egg, their project. They pinned their potential, their faith in the future, on me.”<sup>46</sup> The Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso meditates on what it means to take for granted the global reach of Black diasporic figures today, as he fashions his own body in the style of figures such as Angela Davis, Nelson Mandela, and in the military uniforms favored by Emperor Selassie and other political leaders.<sup>47</sup> Fosso doubles down on the question of what and who is “African,” on which aspects of the body do the work of distinguishing celebrities from the rest of us, and on what it means to reassemble the self in order to reproduce these transatlantic celebrities.

This means that in returning to the period of the 1930s and 1940s through the texts of Mengiste and Douglas, we are unlikely to place our faith in (or even to admire) the moral

power of figures such as those favored by the parents in Brodber’s text or represented in and ironized by Fosso’s transformations of his body. *The Shadow King* and *The Marvellous Equations of the Dread* ask us not only to look closely at figures who may have such faith but also to question those figures, usually male, who inspired such faith—whose social power or narration of the future appeared more heroic, legible, or useful. When Sistah Vaughan looks at a photographic spread that includes multiple images of the emperor and his family, and focuses her attention instead on a young woman of low social status, transforming her into the object of her fascination and possible kinship, she offers a different reading of the ways we have understood Caribbean people to have made a claim on Africa, and of the intellectual and aesthetic resources they have applied to their engagement with such photographs. Considering these women whose potentiality has been bypassed in favor of a focus on male counterparts offers us a complex reading of the past’s present and future, opening up questions for us today about how we got here. If eggs of potentiality may also be a burden, these women press us to think about the promise and also the weight of what it means to support their respective communities.

Tracing the movements and alliances of figures who are part of the complex genealogy of what became known as Rastafari, Robert Hill has detailed the material and emotional labor of women who were the spiritual leaders of organizations that continued the work of or competed with leaders including Leonard Howell, Alexander Bedward, and Marcus Garvey in Jamaica, and Robert Athlyi Rogers in Perth Amboy, New Jersey.<sup>48</sup> These women hosted shops and revival meetings on their premises, or they were entrusted with or left to care for the organizational records of their husbands and fathers who led these organizations. In Jamaica, they were chased out of Kingston or they chased others out of the enclaves in which they had found refuge and the space to build their own organizations. In Detroit, Michigan, or Kimberley, South Africa, they kept original copies of the sacred texts of these organizations in boxes under their beds and around their homes. Hill’s discussion of women

such as Mother Grace Garrison, one of the leaders and then denouncers of the Afro-Athlyican Constructive Gaathlyans in St. Thomas, Jamaica, or of Muriel Rogers's movements from New Jersey to New York and Detroit, testifies to the stresses of being publicly condemned and sometimes physically assaulted by competing spiritual organizations or by agents of the state, or of surviving victims of mental illness and suicide. While this suggests the toll of organizational work for all members (including those men who determined that taking their lives was a way to claim permanent sovereignty over the self), it invites the question of the toll of being left behind, and of being permanently attached to these spiritual documents—in addition, of course, to being proudly attached to traditions of profound spiritual and intellectual transformation.

Mengiste's Hirut and Douglas's Sistah Vaughan find themselves in a complex relation to archives that is related to the material, emotional, and sexual expectations placed on them. In attempting to understand their respective situations, they remind us that our cultural literacies are acquired at a tremendous cost, and that accounting for these costs may offer new ways of scripting ourselves in relation to the past.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The photograph by Alex Stöcker accompanies Addison E. Southard, “Modern Ethiopia: Haile Selassie the First, Formerly Ras Tafari, Succeeds to the World’s Oldest Continuously Sovereign Throne,” *National Geographic Magazine*, June 1931, 705.  
Another article, by staff photographer Richard Moore, constitutes the remainder of the issue’s coverage. W. Richard Moore, “Coronation Days in Addis Ababa,” *National Geographic Magazine*, June 1931, 739–46. This periodical was subsequently renamed *National Geographic*.
- 2 On modernism and Caribbean literature in English, see, for instance, Imani D. Owens, *Turn the World Upside Down: Empire and Unruly Forms of Black Folk Culture in the U.S. and Caribbean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023); J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013); Mary Lou Emery, “Caribbean Modernism: Plantation to Planetary,” in Mark Wollaeger with Matt Eatough, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 48–77; Leah Rosenberg, “Caribbean Models for Modernism in the Work of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys,” *Modernism/Modernity* 11, no. 2 (April 2004): 219–38; and Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).
- 3 “The Ethiopian tradition derives from the Biblical verse, ‘Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God’ [Psalm 68:31]. . . . It made repeated appearances during the nineteenth century and by World War I, Ethiopianism had become not only a trans-Atlantic political movement, but a literary movement well-known among all black people from the Congo basin to the mountains of Jamaica to the sidewalks of New York.” Wilson Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1978), 23–24.
- 4 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 20; Simon Gikandi, “Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism,” in Laura Doyle and Laura A. Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 34.
- 5 Maryse Condé, *Heremakhonon*, trans. Richard Philcox (Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1982); VèVè Clark, “Developing Diaspora Literacy: Allusion in Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon*,” in Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds., *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1994), 304.
- 6 Brent Hayes Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 13–14.
- 7 Tsitsi Ella Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.
- 8 Simon Gikandi, “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 3 (September 2003): 475; Gikandi, “Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism,” 46.
- 9 See, for instance, Karin Barber, “Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa,” *Africa* 67, no. 3 (1997): 347–62.
- 10 This photograph of the Emperor Selassie and Empress Menen Asfaw by Richard Moore is the last of a set of eight color photographs immediately following page 690. See also “Tafari Crowned Emperor Selassie 1,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 November 1930, 3; and “The King of Kings,” the caption accompanying an image of the emperor on the cover of *Time Magazine*, 3 November 1930.
- 11 Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 116–18.
- 12 Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 116.
- 13 Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 118.
- 14 Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 119.
- 15 These advertisements are from the opening pages of the June 1931 edition of *National Geographic Magazine*.
- 16 This widely reproduced image of Alice Prin was photographed by Man Ray, who was often hired by collectors in Paris to photograph African objects. This photograph was probably conceived as an intentional scenario by his collaborator M. George Sakier. See Wendy Grossman and Steven Manfred’s discussion of the significance of the photograph’s placement in a fashion magazine; Man Ray’s aspirational rather than assured identity as an *artist*; and the significance of a female readership that was developing a taste for such objects, and probably also collecting them—activities assumed to be restricted to collectors, well-known artists such as Pablo Picasso, and galleries and museums. Grossman and Manfred, “Unmasking Man Ray’s *Noire et Blanche*,” *American Art* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 134–47.
- 17 Grossman and Manfred, “Unmasking Man Ray’s *Noire et Blanche*,” 139; my emphasis.
- 18 The 1943 Hollywood film *I Walked with a Zombie*, set on a Caribbean island, suggests the danger to transatlantic whiteness of white women’s attraction to Caribbean religions such as Vodou. *I Walked with a Zombie*, dir. Jacques Tourneur (RKO Pictures, 1943). And see Marianna Torgovnik’s reading of Prin in this photograph as imprisoned, as locked

- into her role as a stylized “formal counterpoint” to the mask rather than “an authentic, in-‘sightful’ being.” Torgovnik, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 35.
- 19 See photograph and “Prince George to Be Made a Duke,” [Jamaica] *Gleaner*, 4 November 1930, 1, and, in the same issue, “Lavish Pageantry at Coronation of Abyssinian King,” 18.
- 20 “‘King of All Negroes’ and ‘Second Greatest Man in the World.’” *Gleaner*, 22 April 1931, 26, reprinted from *Amsterdam News*, 14 April 1931; “Ethiopian Warriors Celebrate Emperor’s First Year of Rule,” *Gleaner*, 17 November 1931, 25.
- 21 See, for instance, “Abyssinia Will End Slavery, Freeing Two Million in Fifteen Years,” *Gleaner*, 12 April 1932, 1.
- 22 See, for instance, the following, regarding African- and Asian-connected sources on the region’s spiritual traditions and their criminalization, but eggs are potentially part of First Nation and other traditions as well: Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), chaps. 6 and 8; Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Aisha Khan, *The Deepest Dye: Obeah, Hosay, and Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).
- 23 Martha Beckwith, *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), 67, 120, 121, 144; and see Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa*, 289, for phrases from Kongo/Palo spiritual practice in Cuba that constitute a sort of lingua franca for descendants of these “religious kinship networks.”
- 24 Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938; repr., New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 8–9.
- 25 On white clay, white powder, and other resources of spiritual power across the Caribbean, see Warner Lewis, *Central Africa*, 172–73.
- 26 On Suzanne Césaire, Aimé Césaire, Paulette Nardal, Jane Nardal, and other Caribbean intellectuals studying in Paris, see, for instance, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*.
- 27 “Co-worker in the kingdom of culture” is W. E. B. Du Bois’s formulation in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 11. See also Simon Gikandi’s discussion of the meeting between the Guyanese-born artist whose work is often claimed for modernism, Aubrey Williams, and Pablo Picasso, in Gikandi, “Picasso,” 455–56.
- 28 Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (1928; repr., Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).
- 29 See Michael North’s discussion of “linguistic imitation and racial masquerade” and white US writers’ freedom to “play at self-fashioning,” while for African American writers this “Black”-identified speech and performance is a “chain.” North, *Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 10. See also Kamau Brathwaite’s memory, in a 1979–81 essay, of the novelty and delight of hearing T. S. Eliot’s speaking voice from the space of the Caribbean, a “conversational” poetic voice that Brathwaite invokes in the context of discussing Louise Bennett’s Jamaican-language poetry. Brathwaite, “History of the Voice,” in *Roots* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 286–87.
- 30 Owens, *Turn the World Upside Down*, 24. Here Owens draws on a parallel between Walrond and Eliot made by Michelle A. Stephens. Stephens, “Eric Walrond’s Tropic Death and the Discontents of American Modernity,” in Diana Accaria-Zavala and Rodolfo Popelnik, eds., *Prospero’s Isles: The Presence of the Caribbean in the American Imaginary* (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2004), 167–78.
- 31 Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). This and following quotations are from page 194.
- 32 See, for instance, “Leonard Howell, on Trial, Says Ras Tafari Is Messiah,” *Gleaner*, 15 March 1934, 20.
- 33 Harvey Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Rhoda E. Reddock, *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History* (London: Zed, 1994); 110; Kelvin A. Yelvington, “The War in Ethiopia and Trinidad, 1935–1936,” in Bridget Brereton and Kevin A. Yelvington, eds., *The Colonial Caribbean in Transition: Essays on Postemancipation Social and Cultural History* (Cave Hill, Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 1999), 189–225.
- 34 Emperor Selassie visited Jamaica, Haiti, and Trinidad in April 1966.
- 35 Maisy Card, *These Ghosts Are Family* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020); Safiya Sinclair, *How to Say Babylon: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023).
- 36 Marcia Douglas, *The Marvellous Equations of the Dread: A Novel in Bass Riddim* (New York: New Directions, 2016).
- 37 Douglas, *Marvellous Equations*, 17.
- 38 Mengiste Maaza, *The Shadow King* (W. W. Norton, 2019).
- 39 Douglas, *Marvellous Equations*, 286.
- 40 This quotation and those that follow are from Douglas, *Marvellous Equations*, 94.



- 41 See Barry Chevannes, “Healing the Nation: Rastafari Exorcism of the Ideology of Racism in Jamaica,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 36, nos. 1 and 2 (1990): 59–84. Stuart Hall notes that, whereas no one in his childhood in the 1930s and 1940s would have referred to themselves as “in some way or as having been at some time ‘African’ . . . it was in the early 1970s that a Black Caribbean identity became historically available to the great majority of Jamaican people, at home and abroad.” Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” in Mbye B. Cham, ed., *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1992), 229. This helps us to see racial identification as dynamic and as temporally contingent.
- 42 Deborah Thomas, *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty, Witnessing, Repair* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), xii. Thomas is discussing the violent persecution of Rastafari in the 1963 Coral Gardens incident, and what it meant for survivors to recall this in the twenty-first century.
- 43 See Sheri-Marie Harrison’s discussion of what she terms a “black Gothic revival” in the US context, including the cinema of Jordan Peele, the music videos and television of Donald Glover, and the fiction of Jesmyn Ward and James Hannaham. Harrison, “New Black Gothic,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 June 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-black-gothic/>. And see Njelle Hamilton’s statement that “there is something about the Caribbean space that disorders time,” in her contention that novels such as Douglas’s *Marvellous Equations* bear out theorizations of the Caribbean (by Wilson Harris, Erna Brodber, Lee “Scratch” Perry, and Antonio Benítez-Rojo, among others) as particularly suited to nonrealist and speculative models, as well as to theoretical physics. Hamilton, “Jamaican String Theory: Quantum Sounds and Postcolonial Spacetime in Marcia Douglas’s *The Marvellous Equations of the Dread*,” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 27, no. 1 (April 2019): 89.
- 44 See, for instance, Amelia Gentleman, *The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment* (London: Guardian Faber, 2019).
- 45 See Julian Lucas, “The Movement to Reclaim Africa’s Stolen Art,” *New Yorker*, 14 April 2022, a review of Bénédicte Savoy, *Africa’s Struggle for Its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat*, trans. Susanne Meyer-Abich (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).
- 46 See Erna Brodber, *Louisiana* (1994; repr., Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 39.
- 47 Okwui Enwezor, *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity. Contemporary African Photography from the Walther Collection* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2010), 329–37; Lauri Firstenberg, “Postcoloniality, Performance, and Photographic Portraiture,” in Okwui Enwezor and Chinua Achebe, eds., *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (Munich: Pretel, 2001), 177.
- 48 Hill’s extraordinary revelations are in his interview with David Scott, “The Archaeology of Black Memory: An Interview with Robert A. Hill,” *Small Axe*, no. 5 (March 1999): 80–150.

# Thalia Ostendorf

Escaping the Ship, Driving  
the Bus: Creolizing Moves in  
Edgar Cairo's Mi boto doro /  
Droomboot have(n)loos

**THALIA OSTENDORF** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam. She holds a BA and MA in Comparative Literary Studies from Utrecht University and obtained her doctorate from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. She was part of the second cohort of Oxford Europaeum Scholars, and a Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities (SGSAH) Doctoral Intern at the National Trust for Scotland (NTS). She is also a co-founder of the publishing house Chaos Publishers, now an imprint of Das Mag Publishers in the Netherlands. Her current interdisciplinary project, "Plantation Kinships" (2023-2025), looks at the nature of kin relations between people of the African diaspora in Suriname and the Netherlands whose ancestors were enslaved at the same plantations. This is done through the analysis of a corpus of "Neerlandophone" Surinamese literature, specifically by Edgar Cairo (1984-2000), and fieldwork in Suriname.

Aaj boi! What else does a man want? You can find a job in this country! If you want to make a future, you have to start for yourself. My brother and I, we are going to drive our new bus on that line. Other than chauffeuring the bus and making your money, man!, you hear soul music all day long!

Because bus is soulbus!

—Edgar Cairo, *Mi boto doro*

It is a familiar experience in the Caribbean, the small, painted, and bestickered buses with their music, which provide the region's public transportation. Such a vehicle is central to the novella *Mi boto doro* / *Droomboot have(n)loos* (1980) by Surinamese writer Edgar Cairo.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I aim to suggest some ways this work by Cairo, an author with a singular vision and use of language, and on whom little has been written in English, connects to wider Caribbean traditions, in terms of both theory and language. At its heart *Mi boto doro* / *Droomboot have(n)loos* is a tale about two brothers in Suriname who are finally able to realize their dream of buying and driving a bus “on that line.” The narrative shows the realities of their everyday life as they try to make their dream last. While this forms the core of the story, this narrative is marked in its opening and final pages by the apparition of a slave ship. The two scenes where the ship appears will be the main focus here. What purpose does this wedging of Cairo's contemporary narrative in-between these images of a slave ship serve? What tradition does it engage with? How might we read it?

I will pose these questions in the context of language, creolization (Édouard Glissant), the wake (Christina Sharpe), and plantation futures (Katherine McKittrick), ultimately connecting it to modernism through the lens of the Caribbean gothic. As McKittrick points out in

“Plantation Futures” (2013), “The geographies of slavery, postslavery, and black dispossession provide opportunities to notice that the right to be human carries in it a history of racial encounters and innovative black diaspora practices that, in fact, spatialize acts of survival.”<sup>2</sup> Here, I am reading Cairo's work as such a spatialized act of survival though a complex innovative practice,<sup>3</sup> bringing the different temporalities of the colonial past and its repercussions together in his narrative.

As the novel opens, the brothers Johnny and Dennis have it all figured out: there is enough money to purchase the bus; Dennis, the eldest, will drive; and his younger brother Johnnie, will handle the money that their customers pay as they board. The title, *Droomboot Have(n)loos*, translates as “Dreamboat harborless” or “Dreamboat ragged.” In Dutch “dreamboat” does not refer to an attractive person the way it does in English and can be taken literally: boat of one's dreams—with a hint at the appearing slave ship. The Dutch title is a play on the words *havenloos* (harborless or without harbor or safe haven) and the virtually identical sounding *haveloos* (ragged or broke). Like most of Cairo's titles, the Dutch is accompanied by the title in Sranantongo, the Surinamese Creole.<sup>4</sup> While several creoles are spoken in the country, Sranantongo has been the lingua franca since slavery times,<sup>5</sup> and while most of the population speaks it, the language is also somewhat associated with the Afro-Surinamese population (in part because other creoles have their roots in other cultures, such as Sarnami, which is associated with the descendants of Indian indentured laborers). The Sranantongo *doro* translates to “arriving, landing, ending up, complete, through, still, all the time.”<sup>6</sup> In the novella these various interpretations of dreams, success, and arrival play out.

The two brothers, Black Surinamese men, try to realize their dream of making money by driving a bus in a country where there is no government-organized public transport. In theory, anyone who can buy and drive a bus can operate on the route. In reality, there is fierce competition on the line, and the brothers are aware that none of the people making real

money are Black. This is discussed in a way that shows the racialized tensions between the country's different ethnicities; supposedly it is the people of Indian descent making the money while others drive for them (57–58).<sup>7</sup> Black men might be drivers for someone else, but they are not running their own operations or expanding into fleets like people from other ethnic groups are. Dennis and Johnny buy a bus and start driving it, blasting soul music while they drive as an integral part of the experience, but from day one the brothers' efforts are opposed and sabotaged by invisible and nameless enemies. The first night, their tires are slashed, the beginning of a series of events that send the bus to the repair shop again and again. And the violence is not limited to the bus: in the final paragraphs of the book, someone hands Johnnie something to drink, which he downs without thinking. When Dennis returns Johnnie is unresponsive, and when Dennis tries to wake him up, Johnnie spews blood. Dennis suspects the drink contained crushed glass but the question is never resolved—nor is the moment of chaos. The book ends with Dennis driving off, his brother on board.

### The Ship

*Mi boto* repeatedly draws a parallel between a bus driver and a ship captain. This comparison is especially evocative given the other boat featured in the narrative. While the boat in the title can be read as referring to the bus with which the brothers hope to realize their dream, another boat plays a structural role in the narrative. I want to talk about only a few of *Mi boto*'s 131 pages, those that frame the story at the beginning and the end.

In the opening pages, as crabs struggle for dominance in the mud, a slave ship emerges from the bottom of the river, seemingly out of nowhere. From it jump ten enslaved Africans, their escape observed by the spirits of the Native people. That this ship, which is described as though disassembled, comes from the past is indicated by the Native spirits, who are said to watch the scene “opnieuw weer” (“again”; 8). The enslaved people jump up from “the slaveries there on board,” exiting the ship on the port and starboard sides (8). The narrative suggests that they arrived during “forbidden times,” with “sick bodies onboard.”

In the tussle of times, eras, and events it is not immediately clear whether in the past the Africans were thrown overboard for being ill, or jumped off the boat, or went down with it (8). Ten enslaved people are thrown—but later jump! (or jump?)—overboard, “resurfacing from seemingly dead streams” (8).

The ship comes up as if it were a natural occurrence, like the wildlife that is also described. But what transpires is that the drowned who roam beneath the river's surface disturb the ways it flows—the way history flows. History is also placed onto or turned into skin, the stretched and chastised skin of the Black people brought there.

They had jumped, far out of the hold, gone! gone! Sink back from slavery as into nothingness!

All these waters! Water only knows nets of drowning, no?, those that catch the drowning ones! Then the river's mouth here, wants to spit them out again, these types of drowned which roam underneath the surface, who disturb the river streams, like human hand with the will to chastise the tides unto the bare-stretched skins of history! (8)<sup>8</sup>

After the stretched skins of history, “time turns again” and we see a skull-captain or “dedebonjo.” This is what the waters “breathe out,” baring themselves before the narrative moves away from the ship entirely (9). Holland, it tells us, does not make people happy, merely gives them things like color TV, thus echoing the book's first sentence: “Holland? Let me tell you! Holland does not bring people happiness. But do you see *this* country? Hm! Makes people miserably unhappy!”<sup>9</sup>

While the narrative makes fleeting references to drivers as captains of buses, it is only in the closing chapter that the slave ship reappears. This time it is the slave ship that drowns in the river, never making it to sea, “sunk by a sea of song”:



A song sang, from deep in the woods of a human's soul:

*Ala liba na liba, pe soema de . . . !*

*Where people live rivers are rivers indeed . . . !*

Wan singi lek' wan se, kon brok' a boto! boat who rode the river . . . boat was sunk by a sea of song! And it was life who sung them!

That slave ship, from which a rowing song sounded ("Boto d'e kon de, soema de nain'o! boat which goes here, boat which carries people here!") . . .

Slave ship, ship which you saw sailing away on water! ship with its heavy deck of heavy wood, with shame on its bow! ship sunk!

Ship drowned by the river, harborless and without feeding upon the sea!

(121)<sup>10</sup>

From there we shift to a, or this, "ship of immigrants," which becomes a specter (121). While this specter is not explicitly present outside these scenes at the beginning and end of the narrative, its presence echoes in the rest of *Mi boto*.

It is these two ships and the force of time (which is not linear) and water that have the last word, the last kill, framing the story of the brothers' *wildebus*—as the buses on the line are called locally.

### The Wake

In *The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe looks to the slave ship from its wake in the present and asks the central question, "How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?"<sup>11</sup> The slave ship that appears here might be considered as more than a literal apparition. The dynamics between the different racialized groups Cairo describes in *Mi boto* are a direct consequence of European colonialism and centuries of Dutch rule. The surfacing and final sinking of the slave ship connects the buses, the brothers' troubles, the racism, and Johnnie's eventual death to the ship and its prisoners. As Sharpe might put it,

they live in the wake of the slave ship. The disaster of chattel slavery only seems to be over because the practice is outlawed, but its conditions and ramifications persist well into the present, a persistence that Sharpe calls "the wake." "Racism, the engine that drives the ship of state's national and imperial projects . . . cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow."<sup>12</sup> While Cairo's novella might be read as a social commentary, this wake that trails behind the slave ship is made visible as the ship rises from the river as from a forgotten episode of history. Additionally, it is present, made visible, in the language of *Mi boto*; the way the characters are voiced, and the story told, clearly borrows from oral traditions. The narrative voice *tells* you things, with exclamations, interjections, side notes, rhetorical questions, and points that are dropped and not always picked up again.

This slave ship shifts, even plays with, temporality. Cairo brings it into the present in a way that unmoors both past and present—is it happening again? Is it a memory? Is the ship *actually* brought into the present, or are the events that happen between its apparitions taken to the past? As Sharpe describes the many aspects of the wake, the water behind the ship is tumultuous, moving the boat upward to the surface rather than forward. This lack of forward movement, too, seems telling. The ship has sunk, and it comes up, not necessarily moving forward, but allowing the enslaved people onboard to jump ship. Are they doing so again, or once and for all?

The wake leads Sharpe to distinguish between monumental time and ship time; it represents a past that is not past and with us still.<sup>13</sup> This alternate temporality is what I would like to invoke here, as it is presented to us in the beginning and final pages of *Mi boto*. The ship reminds us instantly of what place, what time, we are in—and the time and place are inextricably linked both to the slave ship and the people it carried. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot emphasizes, "Pastness . . . is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as *past*."<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the Winti temporality Cairo would have been (and shows himself to be) familiar with is indeed not linear the way it is perceived in the West. The past is not past.

As is the case for the enslaved people on the ship from the river, whom the ship's captain tries to retain even from his place in history, and for the brothers Johnny and Dennis, "racism, the engine that drives the ship of state's national and imperial projects . . . cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow."<sup>15</sup> The text shows that, at least in this case, "the means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain."<sup>16</sup> Moving this past into the present, Cairo plays with a literal reading of the slave ship and the bus carrying people from place to place, calling a chauffeur the "captain" not long after the one on the slave ship is heard yelling orders as the enslaved escape (13), but its embedding in the river hints at deeper layers. History does not let itself become past; in fact it is not past here, as the ship is brought from below and Johnnie pays with his life for even being on the road to success. The hold—also literally present here—is another key element of Sharpe's "wake work," as is the ship. As Sharpe puts it, "To be in the wake is also to recognize the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force."<sup>17</sup> And thus, "The question for theory is how to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our, knowable lives."<sup>18</sup>

The ending in which Johnnie drinks glass echoes the instances in the Caribbean where the enslaved attempted to kill their enslavers by putting glass in their food, although the dynamics of that action are skewed here in the text—the brothers are not the ones in power receiving punishment here. Rather they are perceived as a threat and sabotaged in their plans to become successful and unstick themselves from the fixed dynamics in which the wake of colonialism left them. One of Cairo's other books, *Djari/Erven* (Backyards, 1978), speaks of

people eating handfuls of sand to end their lives. And finally, we must also remember the Kromanti, an important spirit in the Winti pantheon of African origin, which can, among many other things, walk on fire and glass, and is known to eat glass on occasion.<sup>19</sup> When we pull in the thread of Winti and ancestor worship, the people who jump off the slave ship at the beginning are not simply representing the "residence time" of Black bodies in the scientific sense;<sup>20</sup> they are very literally present in the narrative, present in the cosmology of place, of Suriname.

### Cairo's Creolization

Within this cosmology, the language Cairo wields so expertly is of particular interest. Cairo's style and language are part of the confusion that is created around the ship from the river. Sranantongo is an integral part of his writing; elements such as Winti exist only in Sranan, and as a native speaker of the language he uses it with purpose. This creates a unique rhythm and rich language in which Cairo remains unequaled, but which can make the text hard to follow, especially for readers who do not speak Sranantongo.

Edgar Cairo (1948–2000) was born in Suriname and moved to Amsterdam to study Dutch and literature in 1968, seven years before Surinamese independence from the Netherlands. He worked and lived in Amsterdam for the rest of his life. Cairo's work shows him to be a skillful painter of Suriname's social and socioeconomic situation, but this view is limiting and belies the complexity of his structure and use of language. As Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger elucidates, Cairo's career falls within what she calls "the period of the Sranan Renaissance" around Surinamese independence.<sup>21</sup> Cairo's debut novella, *Temekoe*, was published in 1969 in Suriname and written entirely in Sranantongo. In 1979 he published a translated and adapted version of this book, as *Temekoe/Kopzorg* (Temekoe/Headache), which was written in the mix of Sranantongo and Dutch that became a signature element of his writing style.<sup>22</sup> His Sranan-Dutch was found to be so singular that both Dutch and Sranan speakers took

offense at times, and it was referred to as “Cairojan” (*Cairojaans*). Phaf-Rheinberger points to Cairo as “the writer who most vividly exemplifies the problems posed by these different linguistic universes.”<sup>23</sup> As Michiel van Kempen points out, “Edgar Cairo, well-known for his declamatory skills, is deeply influenced by black oral traditions. Indeed his work turns on blackness in all its facets. In the course of his writing career Cairo has gradually shifted his focus: from the black as enslaved and free in Suriname to the black in a wider Caribbean context.”<sup>24</sup> In *Mi boto*, and in some of his other work, such as *Dat vuur der grote drama's* (That fire of great dramas) (1982), “historical oppression and persecution are interwoven with modern discrimination.”<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> Cairo could be said to apply this practice in the language of his work. He uses Sranantongo, already a Creole language, to infiltrate and influence Dutch, creolizing the colonial language—something he was explicit about in the columns he wrote for the national Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*.<sup>27</sup> Aware that the use of Sranantongo within the Dutch language was discouraged in both the Netherlands and Suriname, Cairo deliberately mixed the languages on a grammatical and syntactical level.<sup>28</sup> As can be seen from the quoted text above, the language is extremely colloquial at times, giving the impression that a story is being *told* to the reader. The use of the semicolon, which designates speech in Dutch published fiction (and which I have left in the translation), is used in unconventional ways. Sranantongo is present but not always translated, and Cairo's incidental footnotes seem to clarify only words that have become more common parlance in urban locales such as Amsterdam, while leaving other meanings obscured.

As anthropologist Richard Price points out, “In Suriname, creolization was built on a diversity of African heritages, with far less input from European and Amerindian sources” (as compared to other places) and that “it was in large part recently arrived Africans (rather than Europeans) who effected the process of creolization, of building a new culture and society.”<sup>29</sup> This does not mean that colonialism created a singular “creolized society,” as the racialized standards implemented alongside transatlantic slavery by the colonial powers stratified society, leaving the colonials, the enslaved, and the indentured in their separate worlds. This is the tradition in which Cairo stands, and it is the Afro-Surinamese experience which he inhabits and draws from in his writing. In *Mi boto*, different clashes underscore those of Dutch and Sranantongo, and present and past. There is the clash between the two brothers, between the brothers and the other men on the bus line, between the brothers and the invisible hand that ends up mortally wounding Johnnie, and between the Surinamese government (*lant*) and all the bus drivers. This latter conflict shows itself to be a consequence of the plantation economy at the country's origin, in which the government served only the planters' class, the consequences of which still haunt the present.

### **Caribbean Modernism, Caribbean Gothic**

In the context of modernism, its trajectory in Europe and the United States is better known, coming about in such specific situations in the early twentieth century that it seems hard to transpose it to the Caribbean and its literatures. As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out in “Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: The Caribbean,” while the origins of the gothic lie in European anxieties around colonialism, the slave trade, and slave revolts, in the Caribbean, gothic literature has shifted to texts “whose foremost concern has finally become the very nature of colonialism itself.”<sup>30</sup> She suggests that the Caribbean, in fact, “is a space that learned to ‘read’ itself in literature through Gothic fiction.”<sup>31</sup> In the long tradition of the gothic, “modernism and the longer tradition of the Gothic converge repeatedly.”<sup>32</sup> As such, Caribbean gothic

takes up a unique place within the narrative of literary modernism, while extensive research connecting these—and specifically in the “Neerlandophone” space, is notably scant.<sup>33</sup>

While the gothic as seen by Walter Scott might simply be the “art of exciting surprise and horror,”<sup>34</sup> Paravisini-Gebert points out that “myths that had originated in British folklore become racialized when seen through the prism of Gothic conventions and moved to a colonial setting.”<sup>35</sup> Some core elements of Caribbean gothic are present in *Mi boto*: a (former) plantation colony with a history of chattel slavery, the old religion of the enslaved with its spirits, a ghostly slave ship that comes up from the river, and, perhaps most tellingly, these elements coming together to haunt and hunt the main characters in this life. They are constantly worked upon by forces beyond their control, with origins in the old plantations system.<sup>36</sup> The differences between the languages of the colonizer and the colonized counts as a gothic theme,<sup>37</sup> and here, too, this is pushed to its limits in the slave ship scenes. What is said of Caribbean gothic in a wider sense can be said of *Mi boto* specifically: history is referenced and placed in conversation with critiques of contemporary powers that be. As Paravisini-Gebert points out, “In a society where the colonizers’ historical narrative has silenced the vanquished’s version of events, the basis on which a positive identity could be founded, the only defense against an absence of history . . . must be an articulation of the wounds of forced silence through an eloquent, deafening denunciation of the evils sustained in the name of colonial expansion.”<sup>38</sup> It is not only the ship that gives shape to underlying histories and tensions. For example, early in *Mi boto* a fire breaks out in a shop, and the owner stands by powerless as the fire hydrant does not work (18–19). Wisi, the shadow side of Winti, composed of ill-intended spells and curses, is a constant presence, held responsible for anything from bad luck to spirits ransacking one’s house (14). In anglophone Caribbean gothic, voodoo is considered a classic feature,<sup>39</sup> and Wisi can be taken as its Neerlandophone counterpart in this instance (and, arguably, in Cairo’s other work).

As Ken Gelder points out, “It is not hard to imagine the violent processes of colonization, as it takes possession of new worlds, in Gothic ways.”<sup>40</sup> As a postcolonial work by a Black Surinamese man, *Mi boto* has no “mutable monsters . . . reveal[ing] panicked discourses about racial difference.”<sup>41</sup> Instead we read its inversion, the consequence of instilled panicked dealings with racial difference that have kept the different ethnic groups separated and the country poor. As the presence of the slave ship shows, the past that refuses to remain (or become) past is brought up again and, in that instance, does not interfere with the lives of the characters but creates a wake in which they still reside. We might say that Cairo, like twentieth-century authors within the anglophone space (such as Toni Morrison), uses gothic elements to articulate the peculiar complexity of being Black in a former colony.<sup>42</sup>

### Surinamese Plantation Presents and Futures

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy points out that “slavery is the site of black victimage and thus of tradition’s intended erasure. When the emphasis shifts towards the elements of invariant tradition that heroically survive slavery, any desire to remember slavery itself becomes something of an obstacle.”<sup>43</sup> Gothic elements show the persistence of colonialism well beyond its official end. What comes forward is a traumatic history that creates a troubled past. In this sense, all of Suriname as Cairo writes it could be seen as the wake. This wake that is Suriname is also the foundation, in a spiritual and ritual sense, from which Cairo writes, as he explicitly points out in other writing. As Katherine McKittrick has pointed out, “Slave and post-slave struggles in the Americas form a unique sense of place.”<sup>44</sup> “Living in/ the wake of slavery is living ‘the afterlife of property’ and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother.”<sup>45</sup> While this is true, it also lingers on the pessimistic.

Descendants have more than an inherited nonstatus. Ethnographic fieldwork in Suriname shows families tracing and discussing their familial ties and lineage through the notion of



*bere*. Literally *bere* means stomach, pregnancy, fetus, or intestine.<sup>46</sup> In Suriname this delineates the family lineage by way of the mother. Children and whole branches of a family might have different last names, but the main maternal line—and one's position in relation to a known ancestor—is traced by following the *bere*. Tracking the maternal rather than the paternal line indeed stems from slavery times and registers, but it nonetheless designates family and community, not just a continued “nonstatus,” that follows the logic of the slave registers and negates the social lives of the enslaved and their descendants. While they were called and treated as property, we know strong familial and other social ties formed; take, for example, the Surinamese word *mati*, derived from “shipmate,” and used by Africans who had survived together the transatlantic voyage on a slave ship.<sup>47</sup> Anthropologist Gloria Wekker reports her “understanding . . . that slaves arrived in Suriname with the concept of *mati*, referring to the special relationship of shipmates.”<sup>48</sup> The womb is still followed, but this is not a negative; it leads instead to the matriarch of one's family lineage.

This is relevant in Cairo's own case, as he wrote his works “from within.” Cairo's father hailed from Suriname's Para district, a region where the formerly enslaved not only remained after emancipation but also eventually purchased the plantations on which they had once been forced to work. When I visited the plantation during fieldwork in early 2024, it quickly became apparent that tracing Cairo's *bere* was important to understanding where he fit in the plantation's history and present—in the plantation's family. In the publication of his play *Dagrati! Dagrati! Verovering van de Dageraat!* (*Dagrati! Dagrati! Conquest of the Dageraat*, 1984), Cairo describes four *prés* or play-types, dissecting the narrative structures of ritual dance and song storytelling events. These *prés* are part of Winti spirituality as it developed on Surinamese plantations from its African origins and follow a set structure.<sup>49</sup> Cairo points out that alongside its spiritual function, a *prés* always also serves as entertainment.<sup>50</sup> Trouillot points out that “human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators.”<sup>51</sup> In the *prés*, the enslaved and their descendants were (and to some extent still are, although

functions have shifted over time) the narrators of a history that was normally only told by the enslavers who surrounded them. The way Cairo describes it, “the Laku describes the plantation-happenings (history writing) and at the same time the present happenings of individuals, slaves and masters (current affairs).”<sup>52</sup> Encapsulated in the practice, such a *prés* would provide social and political commentary in addition to this ritual element. In fact, some of these *prés* forms were regularly forbidden by the colonial government.<sup>53</sup>

As rituals, *prés* act something out in repetition, and in this element we see something of both the wake and Cairo's apparent narrative structure. Like a classical drama in which Dido can only be left and Medusa will always murder her children, the parts to be acted out by Johnnie and Dennis can only end in tragedy, despite their efforts. In the wake of the slave ship, the (racial) framework has already been laid out for them. That the basis for the present lies in the past is addressed in *Mi boto*'s final pages, when we switch between the slave ship and modern times:

Now, stinkbirds ate the old laid carcass: prow, beam, boat's skeleton! Then they wiped their beaks on the birthing ground of someone, something . . .  
kokoko . . . kongowe!!: come with!! Water, had itself sunk time!  
Vrrrrroommm!! Vrrrrroommm!! Vrrrrroommmmm!!  
The car started away! Bus, which was that car, sailed its long asphalt roads toward the city. A day, on which spirits loaded. That day on which government started governing. (121)<sup>54</sup>

Stinking birds, possibly a reference to the *yorkafowru*—a mythical bird that heralds death<sup>55</sup>—eat the carcass of the boat that has been laid in the river before they wipe their beaks on the “birthing ground” of “someone, something. . . .” From this the bus starts and drives

away, and it is evident what and whose birthing ground is meant. While the narrative is not a play-by-play of one of these ritual structures, it does embody the critical character Cairo describes.

In the novella history is referenced and placed in conversation with critiques of contemporary powers, such as the government. The exchange between elements that can be read as gothic—such as the supernatural, which is presented as commonplace and common knowledge—shows *Mi boto* as a work expertly engaging with postcolonial complexities. As such it deserves its place within wider Caribbean literary traditions. Cairo's engagement with Suriname's troubled history and postcolonial present is one of those creative and innovative Black diaspora practices that, as phrased by McKittrick, "spatialize acts of survival."<sup>56</sup>

### Ongoing Memorialization

*Mi boto doro* / *Droomboot have(n)loos* is a fascinating work of fiction within a unique and large oeuvre on which much more work needs to be done. In framing the novella by opening and ending with the slave ship in the Suriname River, Cairo invokes a longer history and tradition that goes beyond the lives of the two brothers but has nonetheless indelibly shaped them. The wake of the Middle Passage, the transatlantic slave trade, has shaped not just the racism that the brothers face but also the government that fails them, the invisible hands that attack them. This shows, Sharpe puts it, "blackness [as] the extended movement of a specific upheaval."<sup>57</sup> That specific upheaval is slavery, and we live in its wake. To Sharpe's question ("How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?"), Cairo's *Mi boto* is one possible answer. That wake is invoked in Cairo's creolized Sranan-Dutch, showing the troubles two brothers are having with racism under a (then newly) postcolonial government after centuries of extraction by foreign powers.

Cairo makes creolizing, modernist moves away from established European structures of writing, bringing about a whole new type of text, one that is at times hard to read, resists straightforward interpretation, and is rich in its evocations. He utilizes, challenges, and changes the colonial language through his use of Sranantongo, oral tradition, and the image of the slave ship, history and present, and produces this novella of Black life. And while brought there against their will, the enslaved in the novella's opening escape the ship, and the ending hints at the glass-eating Kromanti, giving reason to hope that in some way, escape is possible, that death as it is presented is European time, and that the ship and the brothers might exist in some different context, despite their limiting realities.

While McKittrick moves away from the plantation to the prison and the impoverished city, Cairo shows the context of Suriname to be different. As a former plantation colony, most of where the action of the novel takes place, driving the bus through and around the capital, living in their houses, will be situated on former plantation grounds, continuously creating a plantation present, showing through its gothic elements how the specter of colonialism is taken with us into the future.

## Endnotes

- 1 Here is the original Dutch for the epigraph: "Aaj boi! Wat wil een mens nog meer? Je kan geen werk vinden in dit land! Als je je toekomst maken wil, dan moet je fo jezelf beginnen. Me broer en ik, we gaan met onze nieuwe bus gaan rijden op die lijn. Behalve bus sjaffeuren en je geld verdienen, man!, je hoort de hele dag soulmuziek! Want bus is soulbus!"; Edgar Cairo, *Mi boto doro / Droomboot have(n)loos* (Haarlem, the Netherlands: In de knipscheer, 1980), 14; hereafter cited in the text. All translations of Cairo in this essay are mine.
- 2 Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe*, no. 42 (2013): 2.
- 3 McKittrick, "Plantation Futures."
- 4 An important contextual note needs to be added here. While originally the term *creole* was used in Suriname the way it was in the rest of the Caribbean, that is, to refer to Caribbean-born Europeans, usage has shifted since abolition in 1863–73. *Creole* came to be used for (educated) Afro-Surinamese people in Paramaribo, who were often light-skinned, and this has shifted again to what it now refers to, which is all Surinamese people with "recognizable African roots"; Urwin C. Vyent, *De Paraanse droom: Over de aspiraties van de voorouders* (Amsterdam: New Energy Drukwerk, 2022), 27. To avoid confusion in this essay, I have used the terms *creole*, *creolization*, and *Afro-Surinamese* to distinguish the different definitions.
- 5 During chattel slavery, enslaved people in Suriname were forbidden from speaking Dutch, a language reserved for the Dutch themselves.
- 6 "Doro," *Woordenlijst Sranan-Nederlands, Nederlands-Sranan* (Paramaribo: Vaco n.v. Uitgeversmaatschappij, 2013), 53.
- 7 In Suriname people of Indian descent who were brought to the country as indentured laborers after the abolition of slavery are called "Hindostanen" and in the book are often referred to with slurs.
- 8 "Gesprongen waren ze, ver uit het ruim, weg! weg! Verzink fo slavernij als in het niet!  
Al deze waters! Water kent slechts netten van verdrinking no?, die de drenkeling opvangen! Dan wil riviermond hier, weer uitspuwen, dit soort verdrinkselen die dolend zijn onder de oppervlakte, die de stromen storen in hun loop, als mensenhand die met de wil de tijden gaat kastijden tot de blootgerekte huiden der geschiedenis!" I have left Cairo's use of Sranantongo and italics unchanged in all translations.
- 9 "Holland? La' me je zeggen!: Holland geeft mensen geen geluk. Ma' zie je, dit land? Chm! 't Maakt mensen dóód en dóódongelukki!"
- 10 "Een lied zong, diep vanuit de wouden van een mens z'n ziel:  
*Ala liba na liba, pe soema de . . . !*  
*Waar mensen wonen zijn rivieren inderdaad rivieren . . . !*  
Wan singi lek' wan se, kon brok' a boto!: boot die de rivier bevoer... boot werd gezonken door een zee van zangen!  
En leven was 't, die ze zong!  
Dat slavenschip, waaruit een roeilied opklonk ("Boto d'e kon de, soema de nain'ol: boot die hier komt, boot draagt de mens aan!") . . .  
Slavenschip, schip die je daar zag water wegvaren!, schip met z'n zwarte dek van't zware hout, met schaamte aan zijn boeg!, schip zonk!  
Schip werd door de rivier verdrongen, havenloos en zonder zich te laven aan de zee!"
- 11 Christina Sharpe, *The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 20.
- 12 Sharpe, *Wake*, 3.
- 13 Sharpe, *Wake*, 62.
- 14 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 15; emphasis in original. Readers may note an echo of William Faulkner's frequently quoted statement, in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), that "the past is never dead. It's not even past."
- 15 Sharpe, *Wake*, 3.
- 16 Sharpe, *Wake*, 12.
- 17 Sharpe, *Wake*, 16.
- 18 Sharpe, *Wake*, 50.
- 19 See Charles Johan Wooding, *Winti: Een Afro-Amerikaanse godsdienst in Suriname* (Meppel, the Netherlands: Krips, 1972).
- 20 Sharpe, *Wake*, 19.
- 21 Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger, "The Crystalline Essence of Dutch Caribbean Literatures: Mirroring Creolization," *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 40, no. 1 (2007): 39.
- 22 An English translation of this work, presented by his Dutch publisher as a "courtesy edition," rendered the title as "Mindworry" (1993).

- 23 Phaf-Rheinberger, "Crystalline Essence," 39.
- 24 Michiel van Kempen, Francis R. Jones, Virginie Kortekaas, Yopie Prins, Ina Rilke, and Sam Garrett, "Vernacular Literature in Suriname," in "Caribbean Literature from Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, and the Netherlands," special issue of *Callaloo* 21, no. 3 (1998): 641.
- 25 Wim Rutgers and Scott Rollins, "Dutch Caribbean Literature," in "Caribbean Literature from Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, and the Netherlands," special issue of *Callaloo* 21, no. 3 (1998): 551.
- 26 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 34.
- 27 Edgar Cairo, *Ik ga dood om jullie hoofd* (Haarlem, the Netherlands: In de knipscheer, 1980), 17.
- 28 Cairo, *Ik ga dood om jullie hoofd*.
- 29 Richard Price, *Rainforest Warriors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.
- 30 Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: The Caribbean," in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 229–33.
- 31 Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic," 233.
- 32 John Paul Riquelme, "Modernist Gothic," in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 20.
- 33 Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul, "Towards a Neerlandophone Postcolonial Studies," in *DiGeSt: Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 61–72.
- 34 Ioan Williams, ed., *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (New York: Barnes, 1968), 87.
- 35 Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic," 229.
- 36 See Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic," 229–57; and Riquelme, "Modernist Gothic," 20–36.
- 37 Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic," 251.
- 38 Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic," 251.
- 39 Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic," 233.
- 40 Ken Gelder, "The Postcolonial Gothic," in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 191.
- 41 Maisha Wester, "Gothic and the Politics of Race," in Jerrold E. Hogle, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 157.
- 42 Wester, "Gothic and the Politics of Race," 168.
- 43 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993), 188.
- 44 Katherine McKittrick, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place," *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8 (2011): 947.
- 45 Sharpe, *Wake*, 15.
- 46 "Bere," *Woordenlijst*, 47.
- 47 Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 175; Price, *Rainforest Warriors*, 396.
- 48 Wekker, *Politics of Passion*, 175.
- 49 Edgar Cairo, *Dagrati! Dagrati! Verovering van de Dageraat!* (Gent-Haarlem, the Netherlands: Zuid, 1984), 30. Part of Cairo's information on these older plantation pré forms comes from the anthropologist Charles J. Wooding (1972), who conducted his research on the Afro-Surinamese Winti religion in the Para region.
- 50 Cairo, *Dagrati!*, 30.
- 51 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 2.
- 52 "De Laku beschrijft het plantage-gebeuren (geschiedenisbeschrijving) en tegelijk het actuele gebeuren van individuen, slaven en meesters (aktualiteiten)"; Cairo, *Dagrati!*, 31.
- 53 Wekker, *Politics of Passion*, 176.
- 54 "Nu, vraten stinkvogels, het oud karkas der legselen: voorsterven, balk, boot's geraamte! Dan veegden zij hun snavelen op een geboortegrond van iemand, iets . . . kokoko . . . kongowe!!: ga mee!! Water, had zelf tijd doen zinken!  
Brrroemmmmm!! Brrroemmmmm!! Brrroemmmmmmm!!  
Die auto startte weg! Bus, die die auto was, bevoer z'n lange asfaltwegen na' de stad. Een dag, waarop geladen geesten. Die dag waarop regering zou gaan reageren."
- 55 "Yorkafowru," *Woordenlijst*, 96, 270; see also Cairo's play *De doodsbodschapsvogel. Elzaro & Yorkafowru: Een oraal koningsdrama* (Haarlem, the Netherlands: In de knipscheer, 1986).
- 56 McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 2.
- 57 Sharpe, *Wake*, 76.

# Arnaldo M. Cruz-Malavé

In the Wake: Temporality,  
Performance, and Demonic  
Space in Caribbean  
Modernist Proposals

**ARNALDO M. CRUZ-MALAVÉ** is professor of Spanish and comparative literature at Fordham University. He is the author of *Bailando en un encierro: duelo, danza y activismo en las manifestaciones del Verano Boricua de 2019* (2023); *Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring, and Juanito Xtravaganza: Hard Tails* (2007); and *El primitivo implorante: El 'sistema poético del mundo' de José Lezama Lima* (1994). He is the editor of *Cuentos (casi) completos de Manuel Ramos Otero* (2019), and of the annotated edition of Ramos Otero's *Cuentos "completos"* (2023); and coeditor, with Martin Manalansan, of *Queer Globalization: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (2002).



We have been invited to reflect on Caribbean art and literature as a response to European or “Western” modernisms in a temporal frame, to reflect on their condition as “secondary,” as what follows or comes “in the wake.” But if we let Christina Sharpe’s meditations on blackness and being be our guide,<sup>1</sup> we could also think of Caribbean modernisms as searching not for the temporal but for what is already there, what haunts the Caribbean present, what is enduring yet elusive in its everyday life, what keeps repeating itself both as trauma and catastrophe and as a potentially generative *modo* or *manera*—a creative path or pathway. In a world where, as Alejo Carpentier forcefully argued in his 1949 preface to *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*), avant-garde attempts at innovation and social transformation have become systematized and predictable, bureaucratic, reified, and have turned into fashion, *modas*, or commodified styles, rhizomatic, ever-mutating *modos* or pathways may still be found in the elusive, ephemeral performances of everyday life.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, all modernisms, whether European, Caribbean, or broadly (Latin) American, can be seen as in a perpetual struggle to be modern, avant-garde, to “trouver du nouveau,” as Charles Baudelaire claimed,<sup>3</sup> and are thus always on the verge of losing ground in their linear forward movement toward an undefined yet-to-be-realized future, of becoming academic, bureaucratic, established, reified, fixed. But what if, instead of tracking the relationship of Caribbean modernist or avant-garde movements with previous cultural movements and texts in the Caribbean or “the West” to a historically linear Oedipal struggle to attain the new, we tracked it to what Sharpe has called “the wake”?<sup>4</sup> What if, instead of conceiving that relationship as it was often imagined in early 1920s hispanophone Caribbean *vanguardista* programs and manifestos as an “energetically heroic” voyage on the prow of a vessel toward what the Cuban *revista de avance* described as an uncertain yet idyllic port where a better sense of “ciudadanía” and a more complete form of “hombría” might be achieved, we envisioned it as the relationship with that ever-recurring traumatic trace or “afterlife” that the ship of transatlantic plantation slavery left behind in its wake:<sup>5</sup> the encounter with that

space of lack of subjectivity and disempowerment, that barren terrain ruled, as David Scott has argued in his book on C. L. R. James, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, by the rhetorical figures of contradiction, clashing chiasmic movement, and paradox that have not only fostered impasse and paralysis but have also brought ambivalence and complexity to their texts, and which may be even thought of, as I will argue, as a place of possibility and alternative nonlinear nondialectical logics, *modos*, or pathways.<sup>6</sup>

It is from this perspective that many of the Caribbean’s most prominent modernist proposals come into view—proposals that in seeking to create alternative nonlinear nondialectical logics, *modos*, or pathways that respond to what Carpentier called the bureaucratization and reification of the European avant-garde into *modas*, commercially predictable methods or styles, found their modernist projects not in idealized origins or idyllic futures but in that elusive, ever-repeating present of catastrophe and failure that haunts their texts. Such is the case of Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo / The Kingdom of This World*, whose proposal to capture the elusive, ever-mutating experience of the Caribbean “marvelous real” in people’s lives, as best exemplified by the history of the Haitian revolution, is first founded in this book on what the text calls, both ironically and prophetically, “la poda,” the trim or clipping of the enslaved Mackandal’s arm by the rollers of the plantation’s sugar mill.<sup>7</sup> Titled in the English translation “The Amputation,” the chapter “La poda” signals nonetheless not just the violent and disabling cutting off of Mackandal’s arm but also its potential flowering or regeneration as a paradoxically founding act of lack.<sup>8</sup> And as the novel develops through its many temporal displacements, revolutionary twists and turns, this founding lack seems to remain a constant, allowing Mackandal to escape the planter’s oppressive regime by mutating between animal species, the Haitian people to perceive counterhegemonic interpretations in their revolutionary struggle and their daily lives, and the novel’s main character Ti Noël to acquire a broader nonhuman, nonlinear vision of the haphazard and inscrutable development of justice in the world.

Similarly, Puerto Rican poet Luis Palés Matos's most scandalously daring and critical modernist project, his 1937 book of *negrista* poems *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (Tom-toms of nap-piness and kink), may be said to emerge out of the chiasmically disempowering condition with which Palés describes his homeland in his opening poem, "Preludio en boricua [Prelude in the Puerto Rican language, or Prelude in Boricua-speak]."<sup>9</sup> While the other Caribbean islands appear in this opening poem wildly gesturing, cackling, and swinging to their "parejero [uppity]" drumbeats, Puerto Rico is grotesquely figured as an island that is stranded in what the poet calls "el yermo [the wasteland]" of a continent. "For you," Puerto Rico, "mi isla ardiente [my passionate island]," the poet categorically asserts, "all is finished": "in the wasteland of a continent," you, like a "cabro estofado [smothered goat]," "mournfully / bleat." And yet it is from this paradoxically disempowering condition that, deploying Afro-Boricua rhythms, everyday corporal language, and performance styles, Palés will construct what the critic Rubén Ríos Avila has called a sort of carnivalesque musical performance or cabaret that reimagines Puerto Rican identity as an inventive rootless tree whose branches constantly bifurcate, recalling an inverted version of Gilles Deleuze's concept of the rhizome.<sup>10</sup> At a time when some of the major intellectual figures on the island, such as Antonio S. Pedreira, were affirming its Spanish heritage and denouncing blackness as a "disintegrating" force that prevented Puerto Ricans from coalescing into a unified nation or people, Palés's inventive, both popular and cultured, mournful and festive, playfully humorous, and critical tomtom poems affirm the summoning power and efficacy of such an impossibility.<sup>11</sup>

An especially compelling instance of the potential of this rhetorical impasse and paralysis that founds many Caribbean modernist projects is Aimé Césaire's 1939 poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal / Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, or, as Gregson Davis has more recently translated it, *Journal of a Homecoming*.<sup>12</sup> Propelled by the poet's turning to listen to the "fleuve de tourterelles et des trèfles de la savane que je porte toujours dans mes profondeurs . . . de l'autre côté du désastre," the poem is nonetheless structured from

beginning to end by the repeated chiasmic refrain "Au bout du petit matin."<sup>13</sup> Literally "at the end of dawn," the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end, the poem proceeds as a repeatedly interrupted beginning by fits and starts, revealing at each turn the impasse of its chiasmic structure: the town of Fort-de-France is "plate-étalée," "inerte," "échouée" in "the mud of the bay" and its people, whose gestures are at odds with their meaning and intent, are strangely "bavarde" and "muette."<sup>14</sup> And it is from this insistently repeated impasse, or "grand trou noir où je voudrais me noyer l'autre lune" of the last lines of the poem<sup>15</sup>—and not from the rumor that arises from the "autre côté du désastre"—that Césaire's modernist project will eventually emerge as liberatory ciphered language, inchoate form, and surprising, unconditional, nondialectical speech.

Perhaps nowhere are these chiasmic foundations of Caribbean modernist proposals more dramatically staged than in Antonio Benítez Rojo's ambitious *La isla que se repite / The Repeating Island*. In a memorable anecdote in the introduction to his book, Benítez Rojo recalls the historic moment in October 1962 when the world was on the verge of a nuclear conflagration as the United States and the Soviet Union clashed over the placement of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil. As the titans were about to collide, and Fidel Castro stood his ground that no American inspection would be allowed with the ominously courageous (or foolish) words "¡No nos asustan!," he remembers how two old Black women passed beneath the balcony of his Havana home chattering and walking in what he repeatedly calls throughout his text "de cierta manera," and he knew then and there that the dreaded apocalyptic conflagration would be averted because, as he asserts throughout his text, Caribbean culture, or the one represented and performed by these two Black women walking "de cierta manera," was capable not only of sustaining contradiction and paradox but also of making them generative by displacing and decentering the linear, hierarchical, polarized, and phallic world of binary opposites to which, according to him, both the plantation as a system and

Cuban state patriotic discourse belong into a hypersyncretic, polyrhythmic performance that diffuses impasses and conjures away violence.<sup>16</sup> And while this decentering of apocalyptic patriarchal discourse “de cierta manera” may be seen as representative of the impact and power of Afro-Cuban cultural performance in everyday life, one might also suggest, as I shall later discuss, that its emblematic and fixed deployment of Black women’s bodies as mere “figures” and not subjects or agents of “experiences,” as Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley has proposed in her critique of Benítez-Rojo’s *The Repeating Island*, may also be seen as a return of the racialized gendered binaries that his maritime theories of Caribbean culture sought to decenter and displace.<sup>17</sup>

This chiasmic rhetorical or generic structure that I have been claiming founds many of the prominent Caribbean literary modernist proposals, from Carpentier to Benítez Rojo, has been most astutely identified by Scott in what he has called his “tragic” reading of C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins* in *Conscripts of Modernity*. In it, the founding rhetorical structure or device of contradiction and paradox that he uncovers in James’s text is calculated not only to make us as readers and Caribbean historical subjects stop and pause in order to become acutely and painfully aware and reflect on the way the colonial past keeps reasserting itself, but also to incite us to imagine more complex, complicated, and implicated “paths” that recalibrate, and even temper, Caribbean liberatory ambitions that had been previously inscribed in romantic metaphors of total destitution or freedom.<sup>18</sup>

The modernist proposals that we have been examining similarly use their foundation in a rhetoric of impasse and paradox to make us stop, pause, and reflect on the Caribbean’s complicated and implicated colonial condition, positioning themselves in the wake or after-life of slavery as they wrestle with Western, imperial, and global contexts, yet they are not for all that more sober or tempered in their ambitions. Instead, the rhetorical impasse and can-

cellation of expected teleological endings seem to have made them, like Jack Halberstam’s or José Lezama Lima’s aesthetics of failure, more expansive and capacious, surreptitiously proliferating, permeable, and terrestrially cosmic in their reach, extending the zone of liberation over which they attempt to cast their influence to the ephemeral and elusive, everyday corporal gestures and practices, alternative polyrhythmic creolizations and logics, posthuman ecologies, meaninglessness, absence, and lack.<sup>19</sup>

As Palés affirms at the end of *Tuntún* in his “Plena del menéalo [Shake-it plena song],” as long as you “menéalo menéalo, / de aquí payá, / de ayá pacá” and back, my *mulata Antilla*, “mientras bailes [as long as you dance],” the local colonized *Agapitos*, the tourists, and the Uncle Sams, can’t take away your “alma [soul]” or your “sal [salt: poise, spirit, duende, genius, flair, wit, and grace].”<sup>20</sup> And assuming a rhetoric of rational impasse, Césaire will proclaim the power of madness, of “la folie flamboyante / du cannibalisme tenace”: “la folie qui se souvient / la folie qui hurle / la folie qui voit / la folie qui se déchaîne / Et vous savez le reste / Que 2 et 2 font 5 / que la forêt miaule / que l’arbre tire les marrons du feu / que le ciel se lisse la barbe / et caetera et caetera.”<sup>21</sup> Carpentier will seek to capture the intangible, shape-shifting, multigenerational aspiration to freedom that no revolution or human life can fully consider or attain. And Benítez Rojo will aim to displace the violence of clashing binary Cold War politics and economic globalization on the rest of the world through his Caribbean polyrhythmic, hypersyncretic hybridizations of global culture “in a certain kind of way.”

As a sign of this growth in ambition out of paralyzing paradox, I would like to offer, in particular, the elaboration in Caribbean modernist texts of what the modern Cuban writer José Lezama Lima called the “increado creador” or “informe” and Édouard Glissant termed the ever-deviating, multidirectional “shareable knowledge” that emerged out of the Middle Passage or “the abyss”: that poetic practice or “path” that refuses to let the work close on

what Glissant termed “the One,” or achieve a “definitive figure” or full teleological form, as Lezama Lima claimed, remaining always in a mutating state of what he called in-formity or “creative uncreatedness.”<sup>22</sup>

In one of Lezama Lima’s most brilliant essays, devoted to the legacy of the literary figure of one of Cuba’s most important nineteenth-century *modernista* poets, perhaps his most significant modern predecessor, the polemical, exoticizing, avant la lettre gender-bending, queer writer Julián del Casal, Lezama Lima claims that Casal’s greatest modern achievement—what makes him modern—is to be found not in his attempt to be like his model, the modernly rare, exotic, and unique Baudelaire, but, perversely, in what local critics have identified as the Cuban modernista’s greatest “weakness,” his insufficiency or lack—that is, his insistent, performatively underscored, “frustrated” attempt to confess and articulate a local “secret” identity by expressing the “inexpressible” and bridging the gap between the local context of a Spanish colony coming out of slavery and the modern French avant-garde he desperately tried to emulate: “De mi vida misteriosa, / tétrica y desencantada, / oirás contar una cosa / que te deje el alma helada.”<sup>23</sup> And it is in that conjuring of the inexpressible as inexpressible, as uncreated, formless path that drives his work that Lezama Lima finds Casal’s “greatest [modern] achievement” and “most enduring quality” or “perdurabilidad.”<sup>24</sup>

In his celebrated 1957 essay on American artistic expression, *La expresión americana*, and his masterwork, the 1966 novel *Paradiso*, Lezama Lima articulates as well what might be called a poetics of failure, a poetics, that is, that seeks to extract from the gaps of suppressed or submerged cultural forms of the past, what he terms “lo difícil” or the resistantly difficult, their creative possibilities and, in failing to fully clarify or close these gaps, liberates them for the creation of new modern myths and forms.<sup>25</sup> Contrasting this approach to T. S. Eliot’s modernist mythic method, Lezama Lima in *La expresión americana* asserts that while Eliot’s emulation of the classics also ends, as his “East Cocker” poem thematizes, in failure,

the gap that opens up between the Anglo-American poet and his classical predecessor is consistently read by Eliot reverentially, as an impossibly aspirational lack that reinstates and reaffirms yet again the primacy of the fixed and established Western canon, of its unique and unsurpassable capacity to innovate.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout his work, Lezama Lima offers, however, other models for what he calls “the American expression.” These include not only Casal but also the seventeenth-century Mexican baroque poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose greatest poem, “Primero sueño,” is structured around the rhetorical figure of failure. Modeled after the classical myth of Phaeton, whose attempt to drive his father the Sun’s chariot around the Earth ends in death, Sor Juana’s “Primero sueño” represents an equally impossible aspiration to rise through the senses above the material world and attain universal knowledge through poetic speculation. And yet, for Lezama Lima, Sor Juana’s impossible dream of total universal knowledge is also a triumph for its extensive and “rebellious” incorporation of “plutonic” areas of colonial Latin American culture then considered “demonic”: the Indigenous, represented in Lezama Lima’s essay by the sculptural art of the Quechua Kondori, and the African American, exemplified by the baroque architecture and sculptural work of the Brazilian Aleijadinho. For the failure to achieve the status of the classic is also its expansion or “acrecimiento [both its reclamation and growth].”<sup>27</sup> As Lezama Lima concludes in responding to what he perceives as Eliot’s conservatively reverential and “pessimistic” mythically inspired art: “Todo tendrá que ser reconstruido, invencionado de nuevo, y los viejos mitos, al reaparecer de nuevo, nos ofrecerán sus conjuros y sus enigmas con un rostro desconocido. La ficción de los mitos son nuevos mitos, con nuevos cansancios y terrores.”<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps there is no more ambitious Caribbean modernist literary proposal than Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*. Founded on the experience of the Middle Passage, on the utter destitution, abjection, and uprootedness of what he calls the terrifying “unknown” of



“the abyss,” Glissant’s abysmal poetics promotes a sharable “knowledge” whose practices are, according to the author, not based on territorial acquisition or reducible to Western imperialist notions of the One but proliferate instead, like Deleuze’s rhizome, in ever-expanding horizontal networks of relationality.<sup>29</sup> As he suggests in his 1982 commentary on Wifredo Lam’s 1945 painting *La réunion*,<sup>30</sup> these abysmal practices, like the moving signals and dancing figures in Lam’s ciphered scape, emerge out of the traumatic traces of memory that are the sharable knowledge of the abyss, not as representative signs of a fully recuperated African past that would serve as a foundation for a homogeneous Caribbean culture, but in their singular, differential, multidirectional movement and flight toward what Glissant calls “l’inattendu de l’énorme relation mondiale,” which is where he believes they will achieve their impact and realize themselves.<sup>31</sup>

At the beginning of this essay, I proposed that we move away from considering Caribbean modernist movements in a temporally linear Oedipal struggle over the attainment of the new, often imagined in early manifestos and programs as a manly vanguard voyage on the prow of a vessel toward the ever-receding uncharted territory of the idyllic and utopian, and ponder instead how Caribbean modernist proposals have often relocated themselves in that ever-repeating space of the traumatic trace of a ship’s movement that Christina Sharpe calls “the wake.” And indeed, many of the most prominent Caribbean modernist proposals that we have assessed have done just that—relocated themselves in catastrophe’s wake and redeployed the fragments of everyday syncretic performative styles to propel themselves toward utopian futures built on nonlinear, nonbinary, nondialectical logics and creatively uncreated modos or pathways.

Yet despite their liberatory, open-ended fugitivity, and creative uncreatedness, we have already gleaned from our analyses how these modernist proposals end up reinstating to varying degrees gender binaries. For Palés Matos, it is the swaying corporal movement of the

*mulata* that provides the conceptual frame for the elusive *menéalo* (the “shake it”) movement of the plena that generates “freedom” in the colonial Antilles; for Benítez Rojo, it is the two old Black women with “a kind of ancient and golden powder between their gnarled legs” who walk beneath the balcony of his home “in a certain kind of way” who become the iconic figures for the Caribbean’s hypersyncretic creolizations that make possible the defusal of patriarchal apocalyptic violence;<sup>32</sup> for Césaire, it is the corporal expressions of women that are the material sign for the poet’s ability to guiltlessly elude, “désencastrer” Western colonial rationality and turn without justification or remorse toward alternative logics that empower in the end his vision of a decolonial Caribbean and world;<sup>33</sup> for Lezama Lima, it is the “aguas maternas de lo oscuro” from which “lo difícil” will emerge in its always mutating or becoming creative formlessness;<sup>34</sup> and for Glissant, it is the abyss of the Middle Passage as a “gouffre matrice” that engenders not only screams but also the shared experience that will turn into knowledge and rhizomatic world relationality.<sup>35</sup> Finally, for Carpentier, it is a feminine figure as well, the maroon Maman Loa, or Vodou priestess, whose knowledge of the secret and ciphered world of the tropical forest will allow the enslaved hero Mackandal to transform his condition of lack, “amputation,” and “poda” into constantly mutating life forms, alternative temporalities and logics that will inspire resistance and spawn a revolution.

To unpack the gender binaries that haunt these Caribbean modernist liberatory proposals we will have to turn to feminist theorists such as Sylvia Wynter, who postulated a paradoxical “demonic ground” as a silenced, doubly abjected space where, as Rocío Zambrana argues, other “modalities of autonomy from [gendered] capitalist modernity persist”;<sup>36</sup> or meditate on the Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos’s radical act of disappearance in an “orilla de la muerte” where something other is always about to emerge;<sup>37</sup> or reflect on Mayra Santos-Febres’s and Ana-Maurine Lara’s deep down extradiegetic oceanic voice, which straddles nature, the human, and the divine;<sup>38</sup> or participate in M. NourbeSe Philip’s archival

poetics of interruption, which incites readers and listeners through its “not telling” not only to make visible the mutilated lives of enslaved Africans that the official historical record has suppressed but also to reimagine and re-member them as well;<sup>39</sup> or contemplate the visual art of Scherezade García or María Magdalena Campos-Pons, which is poised between the destitution of the Middle Passage and its contemporary avatars and the exuberant affirmation of irrepressibly proliferating, neobaroque Caribbean religious and cultural popular forms that seem to emerge precisely from such destitution.<sup>40</sup>

Since its publication as the “After/Word” to the collection of critical essays by Caribbean womanist and feminist writers, *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, Wynter’s “Beyond Miranda’s Meaning: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman’” has continued to exert a fascinating influence over Caribbean and African American studies, becoming, despite its doggedly difficult, baroque syntax and recondite allusions and references, one of these fields’ most generative theoretical statements.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps what is most generative and alluring about Wynter’s “After/Word” is the way it conjoins in the term “demonic ground,” appropriated from various cultural contexts and academic disciplines, including especially physics, notions about silencing, repression, exclusion, and abjection as constitutive of the modern Western colonial epistemological regime of the human, or what she simply calls Man, with its very opposite: the utopian impulse, indeed incitement, to express and begin to inhabit an “afterwards” or “beyond” “the space-time orientation of the homuncular observer” or vantage point of Man that will eventually produce a new political and epistemological paradigm, a new sense of the human and a “new science . . . of human ‘life’” beyond Western modernity’s “master discourse.”<sup>42</sup>

Deploying Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as a shared critical text that allegorizes both the formation of Western colonialism in the Caribbean and the constitution of the modern political and epistemological regime of Man,<sup>43</sup> Wynter analyzes the race and gender dynamics of the

play to discover that the hierarchies of the Western “human” rest not only on the abject position and function of the “native” other, Caliban, but also on the absolute suppression and erasure of the Black woman native, whom she calls, following the play’s triangular, mimetic logic of heteropatriarchal erotic exchange, “Caliban’s woman.” And she further proposes that it is from this erased yet pivotal, discursively inscribed yet invisible, “situational” lived ground that a utopian “demonic ground” beyond the “homuncular observer’s” vantage point will be engendered.<sup>44</sup>

Following Wynter, we could then suggest that it is this ambivalent, in-between position of Black and native women, between erasure and utopia, the continued haunting of the Middle Passage’s wake and the proliferating neobaroque affirmation of a new human life that can neither be reduced, reified, nor erased, that contemporary modern Caribbean visual artists like María Magdalena Campos-Pons explore in their work. In works such as those of the series *Los caminos* (The paths), Campos-Pons captures this double contradictory vision of the artist’s relationship to the Caribbean as a place of both haunting and wreckage, “tragic” impossibility and proliferating potential (see fig. 1).



Figure 1. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Dreaming of an Island*, 2008, composition of nine Polaroid Polacolor Pro Photographs, framed: approx. 217.2 × 192.4 cm (85½ × 74¾ in.) overall. Courtesy of The Watch Hill Collection

In her 2008 *Dreaming of an Island*, the artist appears in one of nine Polaroid Polacolor Pro photographs, which are placed sequentially on the wall in rows of three, seated in front of a watercolor painting of an island whose blurry and barely visible, distant outline is foregrounded by the unyielding expanse of dripping blue paint that is the sea in front of her.<sup>45</sup> And while she stares at the painting, unbeknown to her, unseen by her but visible to us as audience, a strand of her braided hair extends beyond the frame of her photograph to the other rows of frames, growing from photograph to photograph and creating traces that resemble mutating rhizomatic forms, outlines of other islands, undersea currents, nets. . . . It is this ambivalent double vision of shipwreck and paralysis and proliferating paths, both the homuncular vision of the island and the demonic one, which is not visible to the painter as a subject yet grows out of her very body like interconnecting braids of multiplying archipelagoes, that Caribbean modernist proposals attempt to capture and perform.



## Endnotes

- 1 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 2 In the preface, Carpentier discusses how the attempt to produce the marvelous in literature and art has turned authors whose aspiration is to be magicians into bureaucrats who deploy well-known, formulaic expressions: “Lo maravilloso, obtenido con trucos de prestidigitación, reuniéndose objetos que para riada suelen encontrarse: la vieja y embustera historia del encuentro fortuito del paraguas y de la máquina de coser sobre una mesa de disección . . . de las exposiciones surrealistas. . . . Pero, a fuerza de querer suscitar lo maravilloso a todo trance, los taumaturgos se hacen burócratas.” (The wonderful, obtained with sleight of hand tricks, gathering objects that are usually found in a flood: the old and deceitful story of the fortuitous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on a dissecting table . . . of surrealist exhibitions. . . . But in seeking to summon up the wonderful at any cost, these magicians become bureaucrats.) And he insists, “Lo maravilloso comienza a serlo de manera inequívoca cuando surge de una inesperada alteración de la realidad (el milagro), de una revelación privilegiada de la realidad. . . . Esto se me hizo particularmente evidente en mi permanencia en Haití, al hallarme en contacto cotidiano con algo que podríamos llamar lo *real-maravilloso*. Pisaba yo una tierra donde millares de seres ansiosos de libertad creyeron en los poderes licantrópicos de Mackandal, a punto de que esa fe colectiva produjera un milagro el día de su ejecución.” (The marvelous begins to be so in an unequivocal way when it emerges out of an unexpected alteration of reality (a miracle), out of a privileged revelation of reality. . . . This became particularly evident during my stay in Haiti, as I was in daily contact with something we could call the *marvelous-real*. I was stepping on a land where thousands of beings who were anxious to be free believed in the lycanthropic powers of Mackandal to the point that that collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution). *Obras completas: Ensayos*, vol. 13 (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1983), 13–16. All translations mine except where indicated.
- 3 Charles Baudelaire’s famous line from his poem “Le voyage” is “Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe? / Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!” (To plunge into the depths of the abyss, Hell or Heaven, who cares? / Into the depths of the Unknown to find the new!); *Les fleurs du mal* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), 335.
- 4 I use the terms “avant-garde” and *vanguardismo* to refer to hispanophone Caribbean and Latin American modernist movements and to distinguish them from the Spanish and Spanish American turn-of-the-nineteenth-century literary movement of *modernismo*, which has generally been regarded by critics as a movement that sought to represent the unattainable ideal of beauty in a display of intricate metric patterns and metatextual cultural references that envisioned literature and art as part of an irreducibly autonomous cultural sphere. For a more complicated, marginal, alternative, and streetwise view of modernismo, as practiced especially by the Cuban José Martí in his New York chronicles, see Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, trans. John D. Blanco (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
- 5 “Citizenship”; “manly agency.” In their introduction presenting the first issue of the Cuban *revista de avance*, titled “Al levar el ancla” (On setting sail), Alejo Carpentier, Martí Casanovas, Francisco Ichaso, Jorge Mañach, and Juan Marinello describe their new *vanguardista* magazine as a “bajel” (vessel), whose “proa” (prow) “zarpa con cierto brío heroico” (sets sail with a certain heroic energy or spirit) toward “un puerto—¿mítico? ¿incierto?— ideal de plenitud; hacia un espejismo tal vez de mejor ciudadanía, de hombría más cabal” (a—mythic? uncertain?—port as an ideal of plenitude; toward a mirage of better citizenship and a more complete sense of manhood); *revista de avance* 1, no. 1 (15 March 1927), 1, included in Gilberto Mendonça Teles and Klaus Müller-Bergh, *Vanguardia latinoamericana: Historia, crítica y documentos*, vol. 2, *Caribe: Antillas mayores y menores* (Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2002), 45. Such a description of their avant-garde or modernist movement as a linear, future-oriented masculinist enterprise is common as well in other Caribbean avant-garde programs and manifestos, such as Puerto Rico’s “Segundo manifiesto euforista” (Second euphorist manifesto) of 16 January 1923, in which poets Tomás L. Batista and Vicente Palés Matos advocated against poets who “laboraron con manos femeniles pequeños camafeos y dijes inútiles” (worked with female-like hands on small cameos and useless pendants or charms) and for “estrofas masculinas” (masculine stanzas); Mendonça Teles and Müller-Bergh, *Vanguardia latinoamericana*, 2:157.
- 6 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 7 Alejo Carpentier, “La poda,” chap. 2 of *El reino de este mundo*, vol. 2 of *Obras completas*, 26–27.
- 8 Alejo Carpentier, “The Amputation,” chap. 2 of *The Kingdom of This World*, trans. Harriet de Onís (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 13–15.
- 9 Luis Palés Matos, “Preludio en boricua,” *Obras (1914–1959)*, vol. 2, *Poesía*, ed. Margot Arce de Vázquez, intro. Federico de Onís (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1984), 467–68.
- 10 Rubén Ríos Ávila, “La guerra y la raza,” in *La raza cómica: Del sujeto en Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Callejón, 2002), 153–59.
- 11 See Antonio S. Pedreira, *Insularismo* (Río Piedras, PR: Edil, 1969), especially the chapter titled “El hombre y su sentido,” where Pedreira discusses Puerto Rico’s racial mixture, to which he attributes “una pugna biológica de fuerzas disgregantes y contrarias que han retardado la formación definitiva de nuestros modos de pueblo [the biological conflict of disintegrating and contrary forces that have retarded the definitive formation of our modalities as a people]” (36). For a contextualization of the relationship of Palés’s poetry to Puerto Rican discourses on race, see Ríos Ávila, *La raza cómica*, 153–57; and Julio Marzán, *The Numinous Site: The Poetry of Luis Palés Matos* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), 29–58.
- 12 Aimé Césaire, *Journal of a Homecoming / Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, trans. Gregson Davis, introduction, commentary, and notes F. Abiola Irele (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). Unless otherwise noted, translations of the *Cahier* are from Davis’s edition.
- 13 “the river of turtledoves and savannah clover that I always carry in my inmost being [literally, “in my depths”] . . . from the opposite shore of catastrophe”; Césaire, *Journal/Cahier*, 76–77.
- 14 “flat-spread out”; “inert”; “run aground [or stranded, shipwrecked]”; “talkative and silent [or chatty and mute]”; Césaire, *Journal/Cahier*, 76–79.
- 15 “the great black hole wherein I longed to drown myself the other moon”; Césaire, *Journal/Cahier*, 148–49.
- 16 “¡No nos asustan! [We’re not afraid!]” are words in a speech delivered at the time by Castro on Cuban national TV whose footage is included in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s celebrated film *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*) (Havana: ICAIC, 1968): 1:31:50; “in a certain kind of way”; Antonio Benítez Rojo, *La isla que se repite: El Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* (Hanover, NH: Del Norte, 1989), xiii–xiv; *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 10.
- 17 Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ* 14, nos. 2–3 (2008): 197.
- 18 As Scott argues in *Conscripts of Modernity*, “Tragedy may offer a different lesson than revolutionary Romance does about pasts from which we have come and their relation to presents we inhabit and futures we might anticipate or hope for. If one of the great lessons of Romance is that we are masters and mistresses of our destiny, that our pasts can be left behind and new futures leaped into, tragedy has a less sanguine teaching to offer. Tragedy has a more respectful attitude to the past, to the often-cruel permanence of its impress: it honors, however reluctantly, the obligations the past imposes. Perhaps part of the value of the story-form of tragedy for our present, then, is not merely that it raises a profound challenge to the hubris of the revolutionary (and modernist) longing for total revolution, but that it does so in a way that reopens a path to formulating a criticism of the present” (135).
- 19 On Jack Halberstam’s utopian resignification of failure, see “The Queer Art of Failure,” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 87–121.
- 20 “shake it shake it, / from here to there / from there to here”; Palés, *Obras*, vol. 1, *Poesía*, 528. On dance as a feminine quotidian performative means of accessing the world of African diasporic spirituality and potential, see Marzán, *The Numinous Site*, 153–55; and as the triumph of Puerto Rico’s dialogic and syncretic, corporal African diasporic culture, often represented in Palés in feminine terms, over Western monological paradigms, see Ríos Ávila, *La raza cómica*, 168–72.
- 21 “The flamboyant [or flaming] madness of inveterate cannibalism”; “the madness that remembers / the madness that howls / the madness that sees / the madness that bursts its chains [or is unleashed] / And you know the rest / That 2 and 2 are 5 / that the forest meows / that the tree plucks the maroons from the fire / that the sky strokes its beard / etc. etc.”; Césaire, *Journal/Cahier*, 100–101.
- 22 The concept of “creative uncreatedness” or “formlessness” recurs throughout José Lezama Lima’s texts. One of its clearest articulations appears in his answer to a survey on the relationship between literature and revolution, “Literatura y revolución (Encuestas): Los autores,” *Casa de las Américas*, nos. 51–52 (1968–69): 131. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 8. On Lezama Lima’s concept of “lo increado creador” or creative uncreatedness, see the essay collection *Asedios a lo increado: Nuevas perspectivas sobre Lezama Lima* (Madrid: Verbum, 2015), including my essay, “Entre la épica y el consumo: Lezama Lima y las revoluciones” (45–82). See especially Jaime Rodríguez Matos’s most comprehensive work on the subject, *Writing of the Formless: José Lezama Lima and the End of Time* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), and my “Lezama Lima’s Julián del Casal: A New Aesthetics of Reception and Failure for Postrevolutionary Times,” *Small Axe*, no. 60 (November 2019): 156–66.
- 23 “About my mysterious, / gloomy and disillusioned life / you will hear a thing told / that will leave your heart frozen.” These lines of Casal’s poem “Rondeles,” from *Bustos y rimas* (1893), are quoted by Lezama Lima in his essay “Julián del Casal,” in *Obras completas* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 1977), 82.
- 24 Lezama Lima, “Julián del Casal,” *Obras completas*, 82. See the English translation of this text by Robin Myers in *Small*



- Axe, no. 60 (November 2019): 131–54, and my annotated version of the Spanish original in the online journal *La Habana Elegante* 53 (Spring–Summer 2013), [www.habanaelegante.com/Spring\\_Summer\\_2013/Hojas\\_CruzMalave.html](http://www.habanaelegante.com/Spring_Summer_2013/Hojas_CruzMalave.html).
- 25 Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, ed. Irlemar Chiampi (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 7.
- 26 While critics, such as Cintio Vitier, have consistently contrasted Lezama Lima's poetics to modernist or avant-garde approaches such as Eliot's, Ingrid Robyn has argued in *Márgenes del reverso: Lezama Lima en la encrucijada* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Almenara, 2020) that Lezama Lima does not so much reject avant-garde aesthetics in his writing as engages with it and incorporates it. As she has shown, Lezama Lima's open rejection of many of the tenets and attitudes of the local Cuban vanguardista movement, as best exemplified by the *revista de avance*, and European avant-garde movements, such as surrealism, may also be interpreted from the perspective of the "márgenes," or the margins of the other side or "reverso" of his stated opposition, as an engagement with modernism. Following Lezama Lima's adoption of the term "contraconquista" to refer to Latin America's cultural engagement with European styles and forms, specifically the baroque, she calls this engagement "contravanguardia."
- 27 In *La expresión americana* Lezama Lima affirms that the (Latin) American baroque, as exemplified by José Kondori and Aleijadinho, is the result of the reception and transformation of the European baroque into a "estilo . . . acrecido," that is, an expanded, enriched, augmented or "grown" style but also, as the legal usage of the term "acrecido" suggests, a reclaimed style, a style whose rights and privileges accrue to its American heirs because of its European heirs' inability or incapacity to exercise them (105).
- 28 "Everything will have to be reconstructed, reinvented again, and the old myths, on reappearing once more, will offer us their incantations and enigmas with an unknown face. The fiction of myths is [the creation of] new myths, with new exhaustions and new fears." Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, 58.
- 29 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 8.
- 30 See an image of Lam's 1945 *La réunion* at the Pompidou Center: <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/oeuvre/mi2YJ4X>.
- 31 "the unexpected enormity of world relationality"; Édouard Glissant, "Lam: L'envol et la réunion," *CARE* 10 (April 1983): 15. This essay was originally published in *CNAC Magazine: Revue du Centre Pompidou* (December 1982).
- 32 Benítez Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 10.
- 33 "dislodge and disembed"; Césaire, *Journal/Cahier*, 78.
- 34 "maternal waters of darkness"; "the [resistantly] difficult": Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, 49.
- 35 "matrix or womb abyss"; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
- 36 Rocio Zambrana, "Whither Theory? Debts to Caliban's 'Woman,'" *Diacritics* 49, no. 2 (2021): 86.
- 37 "shore of death." Critics have often identified Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos's modernist poetics with the radical disappearance or death of her poetic subject and the emergence of a singular otherness. See, for instance, her poem, "Entre mi voz y el tiempo," *Obra poética completa* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 2013), 130–31. For the diverse ways critics have addressed this topic, see Rubén Ríos Ávila, "Julia de Burgos y el instante doloroso del mundo," *Revista Casa de las Américas* 240 (July–September 2005): 89–95; Lena Burgos-La Fuente's introduction to the special issue on Julia de Burgos in *Centro Journal* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2014), "Untended Eyes: Literary Politics of Julia de Burgos—Introducción," 14–15; and, in the same issue, Ronald Mendoza de Jesús, "La intensa soledad de la supervivencia: *El mar y tú*," 218–53, and Juan Carlos Quintero Herencia, "Es yo misma borrando las riberas del mar: Teoría de la imagen (archipiélago) en Julia de Burgos," 254–87. For a multidisciplinary analysis of the way Nuyorican and Latinx Caribbean diasporic artists have deployed and reworked Burgos's life and work, especially her death, through the process of mourning and commemoration in performance and visual arts to create an always ambiguous and contested Burgos icon and reinvent marginalized subjectivities, see Vanessa Pérez-Rosario, *Becoming Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 123–46, and "The Afterlives of Julia de Burgos," *Small Axe*, no. 54 (November 2017): 210–12. For a philosophically inspired critique of the place of death in the creation of what the author calls, following Walter Benjamin, a "catastrophic tradition" that reduces Burgos's work to a canonical, theological, or "totemic" reading of Puerto Rican identity and history, see Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús's recent book, *Catastrophic Historicism: Reading Julia de Burgos Dangerously* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023), 63–86.
- 38 Ana-Maurine Lara, *Erzulie's Skirt* (Washington, DC: Redbone, 2006); Mayra Santos-Febres, *Boat People*, trans. Vanessa Pérez-Rosario (2005; rev. ed., Phoenix: Cardboard House, 2021). For a brilliant reading of the image of the sea in Lara's novel, see Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," 199–203. For an enlightening reading of Santos-Febres's *Boat People*, see Rebeca Hey-Colón's *Channeling Knowledges: Water and Afro-diasporic Spirits in Latinx and Caribbean Worlds* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023), 27–53.
- 39 See Laurie Lambert, "Poetics of Reparation in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*," *Global South* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 107–29.
- 40 On Scherezade García's work on the Atlantic as a space of exorbitantly baroque joy and haunting destitution, see her

catalogue, *Scherezade García: From This Side of the Atlantic*, ed. Olga U. Herrera (Washington, DC: Art Museum of the Americas, 2020), and Marisol Moreno, "Liquid Highway to Salvation: the Art of Scherezade García," *Crossing Waters: Undocumented Migration in Hispanophone Caribbean and Latinx Literature and Art* (Austin: University of Texas, 2022), 118–31.

- 41 Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1990). About its influence in Caribbean, African American, and gender and sexuality studies, see Carole Boyce Davies, "Occupying the Terrain: Reengaging 'Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" *American Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (December 2018): 837–45. See also Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Justine M. Bakker, "Locating the Oceanic in Sylvia Wynter's 'Demonic Ground,'" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 1–22.
- 42 Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meaning," 364–66. Inspired by Wynter, Robert F. Reid-Pharr brilliantly analyzes in *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-humanist Critique* the relationship between modernist African American and Spanish artists and their attempt to both come to terms with and transcend the racial protocols and binaries that, according to Wynter, founded the contemporary Western regime of "Man" as a product of Spain's post-1492 racialized colonization of the Americas (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 12.
- 43 By calling Shakespeare's *The Tempest* a shared critical Caribbean allegorical text, I refer to the way it has been continuously reinterpreted by Caribbean writers to dialogue about the colonial condition. See George Lamming, *The Pleasure of Exile* (1960; repr., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Hutchinson Heinemann, 1963); Aimé Césaire, *Une tempête* (Paris: Seuil, 1969); and Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Calibán: Apuntes sobre la cultura en Nuestra América* (Mexico City: Diógenes, 1971), itself a response to the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* (1900; repr., ed. Gordon Brotherston, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). Wynter's "Beyond Miranda's Meaning," which overtly cites Césaire, is part of this critical tradition.
- 44 Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meaning," 364.
- 45 On Campos-Pons's use of Polaroid Polacolor Pro photography, see Mazzie M. Harris, "'This, This, This, This': Photography in Pieces," from the catalogue of her exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum and J. Paul Getty Museum, *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Behold*, ed. Carmen Hermo (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2023), 38–47.

# Régine Michelle Jean-Charles

Haitian Feminists and the  
Contradictions of Modernity

**RÉGINE MICHELLE JEAN-CHARLES** is the Dean's Professor of Culture and Social Justice as well as Director of Africana Studies at Northeastern University and a professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. A Black feminist literary scholar who works at the intersections of race, gender and justice from a global perspective, her scholarship and teaching include work on Black France, African diasporic literatures, Caribbean Studies, Haiti, and the Haitian diaspora. She is the author of three books and numerous publications that have appeared in books, edited volumes, and peer-reviewed journals. Her most recent book, *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction* (University of Virginia Press, 2022) received an Honorable Mention for the Modern Language Association's the James Russell Lowell Prize. Jean-Charles is currently at work on two book projects—*The Rape Culture Syllabus* is under contract with Columbia University Press, and *Tifi at the Center: Holding Haitian Girlhood*.

“We are both a product of 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.”<sup>1</sup> So spoke the author Yanick Lahens during an interview about her 2019 Collège de France lecture. Lahens had been appointed as the inaugural “chair of Francophone worlds” and was charged with delivering a series of talks and teaching a class for which she chose the auspicious present- and future-facing title *Urgence(s) d’écrire, rêves d’habiter* (Urgency or urgencies of writing, dream(s) of inhabiting).<sup>2</sup> Lahens’s point straddles history, culture, identity, and art. As “a product of modernity, and a response to it,” Haiti’s twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts are inextricable from developments of modernity. The same is true of the country’s existence. More precisely, the unprecedented Haitian Revolution was possible because of the forces that were at work during the age of revolutions. The profound social, cultural, and political transformations taking place at the end of the eighteenth century, just as the Haitian Revolution was in its nascent phases (1791–1804), were in many ways a product of and a reaction to the seismic shifts occurring in the world during that period. As a *response to modernity* that is clear-eyed about its limitations and contradictions, Haiti inhabits a space of rupture because the era that brought on such sweeping, Enlightenment-inspired transformation fundamentally failed to accommodate the possibility of Haiti’s existence. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot summed it up superbly, “How does one write a history of the impossible?”<sup>3</sup> In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Trouillot famously exegetes how the Haitian Revolution was portrayed (and in many cases ignored) as unthinkable and impossible. When viewed as a site of impossibility and unthinkability, Haiti manifests the contradictions of modernity. Describing her choice of theme—*Urgence(s) d’écrire, rêve(s) d’habiter*—in reference to the Revolution, Lahens explains further that “la littérature qui va naître justement de cet impensable ne pouvait que faire appel à l’impossible, justement, à travers les mots pour dire. Toute notre littérature sera marquée par cette exceptionnalité.”<sup>4</sup>

While I am inclined to resist the tendency to frame Haiti through the lens of exceptionalism, I am drawn to Lahens’s observations about modernity in order to wade through those contradictions and discern how they surface in the work of two contemporary Haitian feminist artists and authors (who are also mother and daughter): Kettly Mars (1958–) and Tessa Mars (1985–).<sup>5</sup> I am interested in how their literary and visual texts engage, resist, and dwell in spaces of contradiction. In my view, these cultural workers adopt an aesthetic of simultaneity that operates as one way to navigate the contradictions of modernity Lahens eloquently identifies. As a marker of creative work, simultaneity also invokes one of the essential principles of Black feminist theorizing, which embraces dynamism, evolution, and multiplicity. Following the charge of the *Small Axe* convening in Amsterdam in November 2023, I want to probe 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.<sup>6</sup> How do Yanick Lahens, Kettly Mars, and Tessa Mars intervene in visual, literary, and intellectual discourse about injustice? How do they activate an ethical imagination that also struggles against it? How does the idea and aesthetic of contradiction emerge as a site of possibility for broaching questions about injustice in an intersectional way?

Yanick Lahens has ruminated on Haiti and modernity in myriad contexts and forms, including literary criticism, interviews, and public lectures. For example, in her famous 1990 study *L’exil entre l’ancrage et la fuite* (Exile between mooring and flight), Lahens writes, “Indisputably, Marie Chauvet opened the way for the modern novel in Haiti, even if, unfortunately, she has remained completely misunderstood by her own country.”<sup>7</sup> First, it should be noted that the *entre l’ancrage et la fuite* of Lahens’s title situates us firmly in a landscape of contradiction. Placing exile between anchorage and flight means attending to the contradictions introduced by the concept alone. Lahens explains here that because Chauvet’s writing emerged while Haiti was in the throes of the Duvalier dictatorship, her literary production was inherently enmeshed in contradiction and contestation. Chauvet used the form

to plumb the depths of *la terreur*. The structure of *Amour, colère et folie* (1968; *Love, Anger, Madness*, 2009) attests to Chauvet's ability to test the limits of form and genre. Even more, expressing oneself through art while under the thumb of a totalitarian regime is to "create dangerously," as Edwidge Danticat has rightly named it.<sup>8</sup> If Chauvet did indeed inaugurate the modern novel in Haiti, this is in no small part due to her multigenre way of writing about present realities.

Lahens's fiction also demonstrates the theme of contradiction. In her fifth novel, *Douces déroutés* (2018; *Sweet Undoings*, 2023), she immediately signals her concern with contradiction in the book's title, which juxtaposes sweetness and disarray. The novel offers a commentary on contemporary Haitian society centered on political corruption and strife. Throughout *Douces déroutés*, Lahens depicts this political dysfunction as a way to decry it. Lahens offers a pointed critique of a society perilously divided between those she describes as *les vainqueurs et les vaincus* (the conquerors and the conquered). This is the same language she uses to characterize the gross inequality between the rich and the poor in her award-winning novel *La couleur de l'aube* (2002; *The Color of Dawn*, 2013). Elsewhere Lahens has pointed out that because "the entire Haitian twentieth century begins with occupation . . . [and] the Duvalier era brings it to a close," Haitian literature of the period is produced in and through inherent tensions.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Lahens's lived experience has forced her to reckon with the contradictions of modernity as emblemized in the relationship between Haiti and France. Describing her time as a student in France, Lahens writes about her surprise in discovering that, "dans ce lieu, je n'étais ni *la fille*, ni *la copine*, je n'existais pas."<sup>9</sup>

Lahens's measured appreciation of contradiction is further evident in how she conceptualizes the social dynamics of gender. In an interview for *Clio*, she declares that "we are feminists

every time we remove that all too restrictive garment, ignore the walls erected about us, and dare to speak freely. So we inevitably oscillate between the two."<sup>10</sup> Here she articulates a stance of contradiction that is informed by her positionality. I read the "walls" that she refers to as operating in a manner similar to the structures and strictures of modernity, requiring gender identity to be fixed into a single frame. At the same time, Lahens is quick to exalt advances afforded by the feminist movement that are allowing more nuanced versions of gender justice to come to fruition. "We also mustn't forget the colossal work accomplished by feminist organizations for women's equality. The transformation is absolutely thrilling."<sup>11</sup> Because Lahens understands the gender politics of her writing in terms of the social expectations foisted upon women, it can also be said that even the act of writing is a contradictory practice. "For women, writing means laying oneself bare because women's first clothing is supposed to be silence and self-effacement. Writing means undressing and moving into a forbidden territory."<sup>9</sup> Lahens's recognition of how women's organizations currently work to advance gender justice in Haiti invites us to ask additional questions about how feminist artists, academics, and authors navigate the terrain of contradiction that she elucidates in her Collège de France lectures.

### **Kettly Mars: An Ethic of Contradiction**

The popular and prolific author Kettly Mars works in multiple genres and has become notorious for her steadfast refusal of simplicity, binaries, and neat closures. Her novels, short stories, and poetry are replete with contradictions. In what follows I examine two stories by Mars to demonstrate this point. Written in 2002, her short story "The Agronomist" mines the traditional tensions between city and rural people in Haiti. As Nadève Ménard affirms insightfully in *The Haiti Reader*, "There is often misunderstanding on both sides. Haitian history demonstrates that residents of the countryside have good reason to be wary of initiatives taken by those who inhabit the city, whether government officials, NGO workers, or urban businessmen. Most national services and



programs are centralized in the capital and other urban centers. The bulk of the Haitian population lives in rural areas, although the disparity is not as stark as it once was. When urbanites venture into the countryside, they are often viewed with suspicion.”<sup>12</sup>

“The Agronomist” begins with an unnamed character ruminating on death and nature. “No. You couldn’t die beneath such a sun” (452). The shortest sentence of the story is also its first. With that “No,” we are plunged immediately into a schema of contradiction: the impossibility of being faced with death on a luxuriously beautiful day. “It was a much too beautiful day to die, the weather was too sweet” (452). What happens on that day is what Lahens might describe as the contradictory *douce dérouté*. The beauty and sweetness of the natural landscape that envelops our protagonist is in stark contrast to the violence that soon engulfs him. After gentle riffs celebrating the multitudinous beauty of the day—from the reminiscing about days past to the delicious pleasure of a lover’s flesh—a new paragraph begins and the narrator switches to the third person with a surprising pronouncement. “And yet death was there, it had the agronomist surrounded, cornered him more tightly, trapping him, paralyzing him” (452). An entire study could be written about Mars’s use of “and yet” to convey contradiction, juxtapose challenges, poke at her reader’s discomfort, and betray our expectations of what will unfold next. This turn is no different, as we learn from the unidentified narrator that a man is being murdered on this gorgeously sunny day.

The slip from the luminous day to the murder is sudden and then prolonged as the narrator now contemplates the qualities of death itself. “Insidious death infiltrating the insistent odor of anise, wild sweet basil, and lemongrass. Death became a terrible thing, shapeless, colorless, with no rhyme or reason; it dried up his saliva and injected his entire body with a glacial wind, an aesthetic that muddled all understanding, all logic. Death separated from shadow, its twin, its namesake, the time it took to snatch a breath. Each one of the men, the women, and the children surrounding the agronomist wore the face of death. They became death-givers like others

became shoe shiners, government workers, street sweepers, accountants. They blocked out the sun” (453). Tellingly, this passage moves from describing death with all the senses—color, feeling, scent—as well as bodily, emotional, and psychological impacts, before personifying it in the agronomist’s assassins, who include men, women, and children. The muddling of understanding and logic gestures to the same kind of impossibility, unthinkability, and unknowability that Yanick Lahens describes as marks of the modern. In Kettly Mars’s short story, the casualness of the transition jars the reader, whom picturing children as among the death-givers sends into another unanticipated turn.

With this shift we are introduced to the perpetrators, who go by no other name than “they,” and who themselves “don’t know why they had to kill him” (453). In addition to this astonishing lack of motive, the narrator then discloses that “it wouldn’t be the first time they meted out death together” (453). Again, the reader is taken aback: How often have these people engaged in their death ritual, killing innocent strangers? Just as we begin to judge the murdering crowd, Mars pulls us back again. We learn that the perpetrators are also victims. “They had to defend themselves against everything” (453). This constant state of fear that ensnares them leads them to question what their own lives are worth. And yet. They are the *vaincus* who become *vainqueurs*. “Life was no longer worth anything, true, but they still clung to it” (453). And yet. In this community of broken-down relations, some of the most sacred bonds are now in question. “The *compère* no longer trusts the *commère*, the father no longer confided in his son, the man doubted the mother of his children” (453). As the “and yet’s” accumulate, Mars immerses us in tension and contradiction. I also read a lurking tension in the naming of the protagonist, the eponymous agronomist. As the one who works with, studies, and works the land, he is intimately connected to nature and holds the land in reverence. But for the villagers he encounters, the questions he poses about the land render him suspect. “Even worse, he was asking questions, a bunch of questions about the land. The land, their private life, their intimacy” (453). His learned approach and professional training cannot match their intimacy with and experiential knowledge of the

land. It should not be lost on us as readers that this clash between the urban and the rural is one of the trademark tensions of modernity.

Still, even as Mars invites us to understand his killers' motivations, the injustice of the agronomist's brutal killing shocks the reader. These people of the mountains, these rural people for whom trust has been steadily dismantled, are a people for whom "already the agronomist no longer existed" (454). Mars heartbreakingly and painstakingly explains their behavior—which exists within a system of the multiple oppressions that ensnare them. Mars again emphasizes their not knowing, creating a troubling sense of inevitability for her readers. "They didn't know why they killed him. Maybe because it was Tuesday, market day, and that the foodstuff didn't bring much anymore after the handling fees, the transportation truck to the capital, because the bad alcohol flowed freely and that messes up empty heads and stomachs, because a strange fever was killing off their poultry, because the day before there had been fraud in Santo Domingo, because . . ." (454). The final *because* at the end of this litany of problems, followed by an ellipsis, extends them even further, serving as a searing reminder of the numerous forms of injustice and inequality to which the rural community is subject. The final sentences of the short story take us back to its original impossibility (which we now know is the ultimate contradiction): the agronomist *does yet* die. Here, another sentence again perturbs our sense of what has happened, jostling our certainty about what we have just read: "But you can't die like that, at the market on the main road, in the crisp mountain, smelling cassava and rapadou under such a blue sky, with lots of stains of color everywhere" (455). Mars's aesthetic and ethic of contradiction highlights the unjust forces at play in the lives of her story's "they," who in turn mete out injustice to a stranger. This cycle stems from profound understanding of how the contradictions and limitations of modernity play out in ways rooted in both class and space.

Mars's short story "Paradise Inn" also finds purchase in an ethic and aesthetic of contradiction to make a point about what we cannot possibly know.<sup>13</sup> At times these are conflictual sentences written back to back, as well as themes that do not quite fit together. But contradiction is also inherent to the genre of this tale, which appears in the second volume of the *Haiti Noir* collection edited by Edwidge Danticat. In her introduction Danticat writes, "Even before the earthquake, life was not easy in Haiti. There was always the risk of dying from hunger, an infectious disease, a natural disaster, or a crime. But there was also hope, laughter, and boundless creativity. Haitian creativity has always been one of the country's most identifiable survival traits. Whether expressed in vibrant and colorful paintings, double entendre-filled spiritual or party music, or the poignant, humorous, erotic, lyrical (and yes, also dark) short stories and novels of its writers, Haiti's more nuanced and complex face often comes across in its arts."<sup>14</sup> The nuanced and complex face of Haiti that we witness in "Paradise Inn" begins with the protagonist, Commissaire Vanel, a career police officer "awarded medals by the high command," who is on assignment in the small northern town of Gokal. For Vanel, his time at the Paradise Inn is eerily marked by contradiction that simultaneously pulls him in and pushes him out. From the moment he first sees the hotel he notes, "What a pretentious name for such a godforsaken place. A rather unexpected apparition in this isolated spot" (50). He is especially troubled by the unfamiliar power dynamic that his time at the hotel seems to introduce. In his interactions with Madame and her daughter Josiane, he realizes that his familiar position of power has suddenly shifted. Or, as he puts it, "I felt like a child who'd been caught, scrutinized by an adult. What was happening to me? Normally I was the strong one" (62). Mars's use of language in this story unsettles the reader by presenting contradiction in language and structure. When Commissaire Vanel thinks to himself, "Sometimes I had the feeling I was fighting shadows," we cannot grasp the full sense of what he is experiencing just as he himself cannot (66). As his sense of powerlessness grows, Vanel becomes increasingly uneasy with his surroundings, just as he is aware that they stem from a force greater than himself. "I was being paralyzed by a will stronger than my own" (69). From the moment he sets foot

in the Paradise Inn, Vanel understands that something is amiss based on what he observes as well as what he feels. By constructing a world in which nothing makes sense, Kettly Mars creates a landscape of contradiction that empowers readers to ask ethical questions.<sup>15</sup>

### Tessa Mars: An Aesthetic of Contradiction

The expansive and enthralling artwork of Tessa Mars features paintings that manifest contradiction in the flesh. Born in Haiti in 1985, Tessa Mars studied at the Université de Rennes II in Brittany, France, before returning to Port-au-Prince. Working primarily as a painter, she uses her canvases to create a bold yet balanced figurative vocabulary that explores notions of collective and individual identity, often touching on what it means to be a Black woman, in both Haiti and the wider world. In my recent book *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction*, I examine Tessa Mars's Tessalines series as an example of a Black feminist ethic that boldly embraces sex and sexuality. The pithy combination of her name with that of one of Haiti's founding fathers, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, inserts her into a longer historical narrative that has been largely male-centered. Describing the omnipresence of the Haitian Revolution in her scholarly formation and family life (her paternal grandfather was the renowned intellectual Jean Price-Mars), she says, "No matter your level of education and schooling, you get this [history] via your parents. . . . [Independence] is a fact that cannot be taken away. This happened. You are a being of value."<sup>16</sup> Mars takes the inevitability of that history and turns it into a visual world bursting with life and straddling contradictions. Mars's Tessalines appears in a series of self-portraits in which the woman's large and pale body, featured in various positions, stands out against the bright colors of her surroundings. Tessalines represents contradiction by virtue of her name alone, as well as through the myriad settings in which Tessa Mars places her on the canvas.



Figure 1. Tessa Mars, *Rèv libète, rèv lanmò I* (Dreams of freedom, dreams of death I), from the series *Rèv libète, rèv lanmò*, 2016; acrylic on paper, 50 in. × 39.76 in. (127 × 101.6 cm). Used by permission of the artist. Photo credit: Tessa Mars.



*Rèv libète, Rèv lanmò* (Dream of freedom, dream of death) is a series of five paintings featuring a knife in various positions. In the first panel (see fig. 1) a fat and fleshy figure stands proudly displaying her naked body with a knife between her breasts, asking the viewer to contemplate the relationship between death and freedom. She stands against a greenish yellow background with beaded streamers behind her as though in a *kanaval* celebration. A collection of dark blueish-gray stars is clustered behind her. We know that this figure is Tessalines with her signature horns protruding from her head. Here the horns are bright red, starkly contrasting with the yellow greenish background. They also resemble a thin half-crescent, a sort of reverse hacked halo. Tessalines's generously full arms and legs are covered in scales like mermaid fins, making her simultaneously grounded and water-bound. Tessalines looks directly at us with a placid expression. The knife she holds in her left hand has a long-beaded tail attached to it that dangles right above her knees. The blade is black and thin, its tip pointing (nestled?) in the curve between her large breasts. While the choice—death or freedom—stated by the image's title is clear, Tessalines expression, combined with the background, gives the painting a feeling of contradiction. Here I see Tessalines also offering up what Mecca Sullivan refers to as “thicker, fuller utterances of Black feminist freedom.”<sup>17</sup>



Figure 2. Tessa Mars, *Beny (Blessed)*, 2021; acrylic on canvas, 30 in. × 40 in. (76.2 × 101.6 cm). Used by permission of the artist. Photo credit: Tessa Mars.



*Beny* (see fig. 2) intertwines spiritual, sensual, and sexual dimensions by centering a woman who enjoys her own body and associates it with other worlds. That *Beny* appears in a series titled *Sa m konnen, Sa m pa konnen* (What I know, what I do not know) is not lost on me as I consider this figure kneeling in a watery world. Tinted with light blue-hued skin, she seems to be enjoying a sacred bath. Her left hand cups her breast while her right hand pours water from a small pink gourd. Patterns of plants and flowers snake up her thick thighs and around her naked torso like leaves floating in a pond. From another angle, a small brown creature appears to be lovingly wrapped around her head, its legs draped on either side of her neck. In *Nan Rara*, Tesselines is among a brightly colored group of people celebrating *kanaval*, the annual celebration that begins after Mardi Gras and anticipates the beginning of Lent (see fig. 3). The context of “carnival” is replete with meaning—itsself a site of contradiction that juxtaposes abundance and lack, self-indulgence and sacrifice, traditional and contemporary. The figure’s naked body sets her apart from the *kanaval* revelers.

Mars has described Tesselines as her alter ego, “a fusion of myself and characteristics of the father of the Haitian revolution, Dessalines. . . . She is about finding my hero, my revolutionary side, and trying to place myself in Haitian history.”<sup>18</sup> For a Black feminist artist, the desire and determination to place herself in her country’s history points to the same kind of contradiction captured by Lahens at the beginning of this essay. That desire is marked by an understanding of history’s significance as well as its silences. Here, the attempt to “place oneself in history” acts as an purposeful gesture of insertion into a space that is often intentionally exclusive. Tessa Mars is practicing a refusal to accept the patriarchal version of history by fusing herself with one of Haiti’s most revered and iconic heroes. I find it important, essential even, that she chooses Dessalines, the so-called father of the nation, as opposed to Toussaint Louverture, Boukman, or Henri Christophe. Dessalines’s stature rests on his leading the victory over the French army and the triumph of the Haitian Revolution (as opposed to Toussaint Louverture, who died in captivity prior to the Revolution’s end). In the



Figure 3. Tessa Mars, *Nan Rara*, from the series *Self-Portraits* (2015), 2021; acrylic on canvas, 25.71 in. x 25.71 in. (65.3 x 65.3 cm). Used by permission of the artist. Photo credit: Tessa Mars.

exhibition catalogue for *Kazal: Narrating Haitian Memories*, published by Framer Framed, Mars's practice is described as an exploration of history, tradition, and gender: "Through her paintings and papier maché pieces Mars investigates gender, history, traditions, and she challenges dominant narratives that seek to simplify and flatten the experience of people in the margins."<sup>19</sup> Tessalines often dons a hat, shaped like a general's but with a bull's horns sticking out from it, linking her again to traditional iconography of Dessalines who has been linked through Vodou to Ogou as well as to the bull in a traditional song.<sup>20</sup> But her body is all Tessa Mars herself, and perhaps some other selves created in her imagination. Beautiful, bold, and defiant, Tessalines is playfully and provocatively feminine and masculine, personal and political, historic and intimate, public and private. Through Tessalines, Mars has queered the historic hero, and dislodged him from the dominant hetero-patriarchal frame.

Mars's visual art explicitly confronts the complexities of Black women's sexual, bodily, and interior lives through a radical reimagining of how the body takes up space. As a beautiful, corpulent figure who indulges in life and lives to the fullest, Tessalines invites us into abundance, and when she appears in a relatively bare scene we experience the contradiction. Blurring the lines between animals and people, interior and exterior spaces, and natural and supernatural worlds, Tessa Mars invites those who engage with her art to see what contradiction looks like in flesh and form. I see a queer nuance in her work that amplifies the multiple possibilities of how Black women's bodies can take up and become space. As such, Mars's work recalls Mecca Sullivan's point that Black women artists "incorporate into their poetics an idea of queerness as an identification of sexual difference that cannot be disentangled from differences of race, gender, nation, class, and the numerous other silenced subject positions that Black women's bodies can signify."<sup>21</sup> Mars's attention to material bodies is a feature of her work that summons what I refer to as the ethical-erotic: What do we see when look at these bodies, and how do they move us?<sup>22</sup> In one image, the precise attention to the contours of women's bodies as they are embraced, backs facing the viewer,

both invites and refuses our gaze. There is no question that her subjects move freely in the visual frame and in the world; their nudity signifies freedom, especially in the panels where Tessalines is surrounded by people who are clothed.



Figure 4. Tessa Mars, *La faune et la flore III (Faune and flora III)*, from the series *La faune et la flore*, 2019; acrylic on paper, 16 in. x 12 in. (40.64 x 30.48 cm). Used by permission of the artist. Photo credit: Wendy Désert.

As we saw in *Beny*, Mars's artwork also offers us visual images of Black female bodies enmeshed with nature. In the series "Fauna and Flora," a woman peeks out from a collection of light peach and pink leaves that adorn the canvas (see fig. 4). The soft colors compel us as viewers, see-ers, and spectators to hold our gaze. The leaves shield the figure drawn in black, who looks out at us with a familiar placid expression. We are invited to engage her gaze as well as the landscape. The series title, "Fauna and Flora," suggests that the focus of the series is the natural world. What we see is a figure in relation to this world. In another scene, a woman on her hands and knees, bent over as though in a sexual position, looks back at us over her shoulder. With these scenes, we witness another version of Haitian life through the eyes and bodies of the rotund, naked, fleshy woman who can be seen draped in color or situated in a bright rara celebration. Tesselines's sexed, gendered, and fluid body indulges our senses as she luxuriates in different settings that are starkly bright against her shockingly white silhouette.

The artist's take on modernism is also evident in how she embraces magical realism. "For me, magical realism is reality. . . . You feel your ancestors are living with you, guiding your steps, protecting you [and] acting as a source of inspiration."<sup>23</sup> In Tessa Mars's art, contradiction manifests in multiple forms that trouble our senses. Tesselines is an embodiment of how the space of contradiction lives on the page and what it looks like to struggle through the visual. According to the artist, Tesselines is always there to "express the voices of Haitian women which have been 'silent and unheard' in the public sphere."<sup>24</sup> Straddling several binaries, Tesselines is also a figure bountiful in meaning for the Black feminist critic curious about the ethical-erotic. With each encounter, Tessa Mars invites the viewer to imagine what a Black feminist ethic of the erotic looks like in visual culture, priming our imaginations to embrace Haitian women's embodied erotic freedom. By showing us what erotic subjectivity looks like in art form, she allows us to look for *and* to locate another world in which the ethical-erotic can flourish. Just as the political-sensual-spiritual triad that Lyndon Gill

proposes to conceptualize the erotic "represents a negotiation of the tension between an ideal vision and our lived reality,"<sup>25</sup> Tessa Mars's art uses the erotic to stimulate our ethical imaginations. As Mars imagines possibilities beyond our present reality, she invites us to see the world through eyes in which the sensual, spiritual, and political coexist with beauty and ease and understand that, in the words of Kettly Mars, "nul ne peut nier la place de l'éros dans la vie."<sup>26</sup> Tessa Mars's artworks navigate the terrain of the imagination with bright and bold colors, soft and subtle hues, in searing and haunting images that strike at the heart of the viewer, troubling geography and history. Her otherwise ways of creating invite us to look for worlds beyond what we can see and imagine. This often is born out of an aesthetic of contradiction that simultaneously pushes and pulls unexpected themes through which we witness Tesselines experiencing a full range of subjectivities.

In the paintings *A Vision of Peace, Harmony, and Good Intelligence*, parts I and II (see fig. 5), Mars queries both geography and history, demonstrating again her understanding of how history is bound to the land. Part I features an elderly woman crossing a body of water. She is surrounded by leafy plants in shades of fuchsia, gold, and teal green. Peering through an explosion of sunflower-yellow foliage are human faces, while a woman with gleaming azure skin and a red-horned helmet floats serenely in the water in the foreground. In Part I, we are not sure what we are looking at, or how all the figures in the scene fit together, if they do at all. In Part I the woman looks down, seemingly searching the gray waters in which she floats. What she is looking for is unclear, but one of the faces in the shrubs is similarly searching. Part II is set against a light orange background with three figures in the middle. The ubiquitous Tesselines stands next to a much older woman holding a knife in her hand. Between them is a large black pig. To the reader familiar with Haitian history and culture, the symbol of the pig gestures to the neoimperial hand of domination always at work in Haiti, such as in the late 1970s, when, in response to a wave of swine flu that hit the Dominican Republic, the US Agency for International Development demanded that the entire indigenous popula-





Figure 5. Tessa Mars, *A Vision of Peace, Harmony, and Good Intelligence II*, from the series *A Vision of Peace, Harmony, and Good Intelligence*, 2020; acrylic on canvas, 74.8 in. × 51.2 in. (190 cm × 130 cm). Used by permission of the artist. Photo credit: Tessa Mars.

tion of pigs be slaughtered on both sides of the island. Haitian pig farmers were given small payments and a new breed of pigs from the United States was introduced into the ecosystem. The pig might also harken back to the eighteenth century, when the slaughter of a pig was part of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony the night before the Haitian Revolution began in 1791. According to the exhibition catalogue, in this series Tessa Mars “investigates notions of patriotism, sovereignty and confronts them [with] the reality of Haitian daily life. [This] raises questions about how the legacy of Haiti’s revolutionary past shapes our society, about the transmission and loss of memory, about strategies individuals come up with to reconcile past and present. It also raises questions about womanhood, freedom and the fight for it.”<sup>27</sup> The older woman standing with Tessalines in the painting could be Cécile Fatiman, the venerated *manbo* (Vodou priestess) who presided over the Bwa Kayiman ceremony. Together they conjure up a sense of history, resistance, struggle, and freedom. It is important that the older woman holds a knife that she leaves at her side. The knife is not raised (as it was in earlier images of Tessalines) but rather held in repose. Both women stare directly at us, but Cécile’s face is tilted upward with a flash of defiance. Her refusal to slit the pig’s throat can be read as a refusal to succumb to the patriarchal forces of history, whether in the form of narratives about the Haitian Revolution or in that of decrees from neoliberal forces like USAID dictating to Haitian farmers what to do with their native pigs. Tessalines and Cécile represent a pair of women protecting an animal in nature that has been neglected and marginalized. Here the pig looks protected and precious, free to graze the deep purple (for royalty?) leaves bunched at the bottom of the painting. In Tessa Mars’s work contradiction functions as a creative strategy that displays the merging of life and death, beauty and desolation, past and future, abundance and lack, isolation and community. For Mars, this aesthetic of contradiction offers pathways for reimagining Haitian history and art through a defiant lens of queer fluidity.



## Contradiction as Difficulty

In her essay “On Black Difficulty,” theorist and novelist Namwali Serpell extols the genius of Toni Morrison’s craft and contributions to literature. Her reflections serve as an apt conclusion to this essay because of how she writes about difficulty, which she reads as often resulting in ambiguity. Describing the different reactions to and interpretations of the baby ghost (?) in Morrison’s *Beloved*, Serpell writes, “Morrison’s writing is difficult to read because it tends toward the ambiguous. . . . The point is that we cannot know, we cannot judge. Or maybe the point is that there are ways of knowing that allow these contradictions to coexist in one person.”<sup>28</sup> These twin characteristics of unknowability and contradiction seamlessly recall Yanick Lahens’s ruminations about modernity that opened this essay. As a production of, and a response to, injustice, inequality, and multiple oppressions, Haitian feminist literature and art offer a way through that rests in contradiction rather than attempting to resolve it. Contradiction does not shy away from difficulty. Contradiction espouses ambiguity. Contradiction is uncomfortable and often restless. In their embrace of contradiction, Yanick Lahens, Kettly Mars, and Tessa Mars illuminate how the question of whether Caribbean artists should embrace modernity is ultimately incomplete. Rather, their literary and artistic creations welcome us into the contradictions of modernity and invite us to remain in them.

## Endnotes

- 1 Agnès Bardou, “Yanick Lahens: ‘Haiti Questions Modernity because We See Its Contradictions’” (interview), *UNESCO Courier*, 6 April 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/courier/2021-2/yanick-lahens-haiti-questions-modernity-because-we-see-its-contradictions>.
- 2 See Yanick Lahens, *Littérature haïtienne: Urgence(s) d’écrire, rêve(s) d’habiter*, Léçons inaugurales du Collège de France (Paris: Fayard, 2019), citations from <https://books.openedition.org/cdf/7261> (unpaginated).
- 3 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 73.
- 4 “The literature that would be born precisely from this unthinkable could in fact only appeal to the impossible, through words to name it. All our literature has been marked by this exceptionality.” Lahens, *Littérature haïtienne*. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.
- 5 See Nadège Clitandre, “Haitian Exceptionalism in the Caribbean and the Project of Rebuilding Haiti,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 146–53.
- 6 David Scott, Caribbean Modernisms symposium description (not in the public domain).
- 7 Cited in Kaiama Glover, *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 112.
- 8 See Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 9 “In this place, I was neither *the girl*, nor *the friend*, I did not exist.” Lahens, *Littérature haïtienne*.
- 10 Yannick Lahens, “Haiti: Women, Gender, History. An Interview with Clara Palmiste and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel,” translated by Jamie Herd, *Clio*, no. 50 (2019): 241–47, <https://shs.cairn.info/journal-clio-women-gender-history-2019-2-page-241?lang=en&tab=auteurs>.
- 11 Lahens, “Haiti.”
- 12 Nadève Ménard, introduction to Kettly Mars, “The Agronomist,” translated by Nadève Ménard, in Laurent Dubois, Kaiama L. Glover, Nadève Ménard, Millery Polyné, and Chantalle F. Verna, eds., *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 452. Page numbers for subsequent citations of the story given parenthetically in the text.
- 13 Kettly Mars, “Paradise Inn,” in Edwidge Danticat, ed., *Haiti Noir* (New York: Akashic, 2010): 50–70. While I have limited myself to two short stories by Kettly Mars for the scope of this essay, what I am referring to as an ethic of contradiction is also present in her novels. For example, *L’ange du patriarce* inhabits a similar space of contradiction for the purposes of scrutinizing injustice. For the feminist reader, the idea of the angel of the patriarch is indeed a counterintuitive frame. The novel begins with a troubling act of sexual tension between two siblings. The central theme in *L’ange du patriarce* sets up a conflict between two of Haiti’s most popular religions—Vodou and Christianity. What interests me, and some thing we often find in Mars’s fiction, is a refusal to take sides and/or name villains or heroes in her narratives. This tendency to inhabit the gray spaces of uncertainty can also be read as Kettly Mars’s capacious embrace of contradiction. Mars, *L’ange du patriarce* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2018).
- 14 Danticat, *Haiti Noir*, 8.
- 15 As I explain elsewhere, we can understand ethics as a process of “questioning from below,” as articulated by Gayatri Spivak. Because “ethics is not just a problem of knowledge, but a call [in]to relationship,” I contemplate how this fiction imagines, invokes, and influences relationships among authors, readers, characters, and texts. Régine Jean-Charles, *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022).
- 16 Rachel Spence, “Basel: Peace Treaty Blues,” *Financial Times*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/53f0fe52-c2fb-4cac-b783-58b4e7e6240d>
- 17 Mecca Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 157.
- 18 Shereen Ali, “Tessa Mars: Full Free | Closeup,” *Caribbean Beat*, no. 151 (May/June 2018), <https://www.caribbean-beat.com/issue-151/full-free-closeup#ixzz8HxdpYysu>.
- 19 “Tessa Mars,” *Framer Framed*, n.d., <https://framerframed.nl/en/mensen/tessa-mars/>. While Tessa Mars was a 2020–22 resident fellow at the Rijksakademie Van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, her work was presented in the Kazal exhibition.
- 20 Laurent Dubois, “Dessalines Toro d’Haïti,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2012): 541–48.
- 21 Sullivan, *The Poetics of Difference*, 72.
- 22 See Jean-Charles, *Looking for Other Worlds*.
- 23 Spence, “Basel.”

24 Spence, "Basel."

25 Lyndon K. Gill, *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 11.

26 "No one can deny the place of eros in life." Kettly Mars, "La sensualité au cœur de la vie," in Nadève Ménard, ed., *Écrits d'Haïti: Perspectives sur la littérature haïtienne contemporaine (1986–2006)* (Paris: Karthala, 2007), 233.

27 "Tessa Mars," Flat//Land Gallery, n.d., <https://www.flatlandgallery.com/artworks/tessa-mars/>.

28 Namwali Serpell, "On Black Difficulty," *Slate Magazine*, 26 March 2019.

# Erica Moiah James

Solèy Danmbalab:  
Caribbean Modernisms  
in the World

**ERICA MOIAH JAMES** is an art historian, curator, and assistant professor at the University of Miami. Her scholarship centers on indigenous, modern, and contemporary art of the Caribbean Americas, and African Diaspora. In 2022 she curated Didier William: *nou kite tout sa dèyè* for the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, and *Nari Ward: Home of the Brave*, Vilcek Foundation, New York City. She is the recipient of grants from The Warhol Foundation, The Mellon Foundation, and The Terra Foundation, and is a research associate at the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Center, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. She is the author of “Decolonizing Time: Nineteenth Century Haitian Portraiture and the Critique of Anachronism in Caribbean Art” (*NKA*, 2019), “The Black Sublime: René Peña’s Archangel” in *The Visual Life of Social Affliction* (2019 catalogue), and the book *After Caliban: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary* (forthcoming 2025).

Solèy, ooo  
Atidan Ibo Loko, solèy  
Mwen pa moun isit ooo, solèy  
Mwen se nèg ginen ooo, solèy  
M pa vini pou m rete, solèy  
Men batiman mwen chavire, solèy ooo  
Solèy, solèy ooo  
. . .  
Oh, sun  
Atidan Ibo Loko, oh Sun  
I am not from here, oh Sun  
I am from Africa, oh Sun  
I am not here to stay, Sun  
But my boat has capsized, oh Sun  
Sun, oh Sun

This essay is an attempt to think out of, and in opposition to, the disciplinary mode I was trained in, toward an idea or perhaps position I find myself taking around the concept of Caribbean modernism as phenomenology in my work.<sup>1</sup>

It is conceived in the intersection of two larger projects; the Small Axe Project's multiyear Caribbean Modernism critical lab—which I am a part of—and my personal interest in, perhaps even obsession with, a challenge posed to Sylvia Wynter by Caribbean historian Elsa Goveia in the 1950s, a time when Caribbean artists and writers were consciously imagining the contours of decolonial and postcolonial art forms. I will return to it in the context of the essay, but Goveia asked Wynter, as an artist, “How do you deal with the stereotyped view of yourself that you yourself have been socialized to accept?”<sup>2</sup> Shifting the question slightly to

note its relevance to my work, How do you reimagine and write an art history that you have been taught to accept as “the” story, one which until recently absented and devalued your contributions to it? I have been exploring what a response to this question might look like in global Caribbean art and art history for a few years now. This is my fourth attempt and is perhaps my most far-ranging, yet still incomplete, effort toward an answer.

This inquiry comes at a time when intellectually I find myself in a thinking space a bit out of sync with the prevailing speed of these times. I want to think through an idea publicly at my own pace. To be able to change my mind, to *détourne*, to revise an idea after critique, further reading, and reconsideration. But there seem to be fewer opportunities to do this, as scholars are increasingly pressed by the need to outrun the digital world, at times publishing work as a concluded idea when it still is in mid-stride. This essay organizes thoughts that are in mid-stride and is presented in three parts. First, I will briefly discuss modernism in the context of “Western art history” and how this hegemonic view overdetermined the art histories of its perceived “others.” How did it question their ability or inability to inhabit the modern? I will then share how I think various approaches to African modernism provide a model for setting aside “the West,” while discussing how this has been useful in shaping my approach to global Caribbean art histories. Finally, I will discuss the work of two artists, both Haitian, as a kind of proof of concept, the visual artist Hervé Télémaque and the singer and actor Marie Clotilde “Toto” Bissainthe, sharing the ways their arts enunciate as Caribbean modern forms moving in the world.

### **African Modernism and the Caribbean**

Since I am an art historian trained within its epistemic formation, the concept of modernism—comingled with that of modernity—has been fundamental to my understanding of “Western art” and art history's disciplinary formation. It is a core concept in art history, one defined by time, place, and art practices driven by a notion of “the” European avant-garde.



From Édouard Manet's realism to the seemingly earth-shattering impact of Pablo Picasso's cubism and beyond, "Western art history" organizes transformations within artmaking into a single upward trending line and assigns value in relation to itself as objective truth. By doing so, it simultaneously produces and reinscribes its authority as the primary lens through which to view artistic innovation not only in Europe but also across the world. As such it operates as a colonial episteme, a kind of world-making that I must consciously disentangle, side-step, and at times ignore to see differently in writing art histories of the Caribbean, the African diaspora, and the wider Americas.

One might argue, as Anne Lafont has recently done, that the othering of Africa, the fetishizing of it, is foundational to art history itself.<sup>3</sup> Positioning Africa as other became a kind of template for the West's relationship to rest of the world—even for the way it engaged civilizations that were far older. To turn one's attention away from the hegemony of this episteme, we owe a lot to curators like Okwui Enwezor and art historians like Bob Thompson, Salah Hassan, Linda Nochlin, and Chika Okeke-Agulu, who rejected the all-encompassing vision of Western modernism and decided to not only question but also disavow and dispel its authority. For these curators, art historians, and the many artists they worked with, modernism was redefined as a set of conditions, a kind of Glissantian plateau or a Scott problem-space that congeals to become generative at different places and times in the world.

I was fortunate to be invited to question the centrality and seeming universalism of Western modernism very early in my scholarly formation at the University of Chicago, when I was asked to consider what modernism might mean in the context of Egypt, the Sudan, Jamaica, anywhere but the self-described West. When you are raised in a particular thinking space, how does one even begin to question—as Goveia asked of Wynter—the contours and presumptions of that space, the ideological rooves and foundations that hold it up? But that is exactly what I was being challenged to do, what Enwezor, Hassan, Thompson,

Okeke-Agulu, Nochlin, and others were determined to do. The difficulties of this, but also its possibilities, can be seen in African art history's attempt to leap from "traditional" African art history—which is arguably a colonial, European discourse and invention—to one focused on modern and contemporary arts of Africa, a postcolonial field.

Western art historical approaches to Africa insisted on methodological echo, the establishment of a single through line to organize the arts of an entire continent—outside of Egypt, of course—from masking traditions to the contemporary to authenticate or validate contemporary practices. In this, the European presence in Africa was narrativized as the catalyst for modern movements in Africa through colonial arts education.

In conversation with Salah M. Hassan's pivotal essay on African modernism,<sup>4</sup> the work of Chika Okeke-Agulu insists that we think again. He argues that the difficulty in making the connection between European African art history and modern and contemporary movements can be traced to multiple factors, one being that the premise of European impact is "overstated" or false. Okeke-Agulu reasons that the arts were not generally included in colonial curriculums in Africa until very late in the colonial game—and then only because of preindependence movements and postindependence attempts toward national self-refashioning, when Africans demanded that the government expand school curriculums to include the arts. Claims of European artistic influence—which Okeke-Agulu pushes back against—seek to frame colonialism as a force for good in a kind of perceptive drag that is remarkable in the ways it repeats in the art histories of formerly colonized people.

Epistemologically, to let this claim stand recenters Europe as the arbiter of modernism in the fine arts, as a foundational premise of our discipline—it makes European modernism hegemonic. It becomes "the" modern model. If your art didn't develop as it did, and when it did, in Europe, it is not modern. If it didn't happen at the same time it happened in Europe

but looks similar to what was produced in Europe at some point, it is subject to dismissal as mimicry and anachronism in contravention to European genius and time. European contact is seen to both catalyze modernism, on the one hand, and spoil the purity of local artistry, on the other, wherever it went.

It is accepted that African art was appropriated by Western modernists as inspiration and as a formal challenge in cubism and expressionism, but African artists' appropriation of the medium of painting is framed not as an intellectual engagement but as thoughtless mimicry. In response to such bold claims and not-so-subtle intimations, Okeke-Agulu argues that "accusations of mimicry in relation to African cultural production suggest a divestment of the African imagination and a simultaneous desire to maintain the African as a primitive other," making it forever a feeder society rather than a generative one in the eyes of the West.<sup>5</sup> This sets up a mythical bar the West's "others" can never cross. Okeke-Agulu reminds us that "Africa" can never be Europe and therefore cannot reproduce European modernism. For him, "Modernism in Africa thus refers not to a set of formal conventions but to sets of critical practices championed by artists confronting or responding to Africa's modernity during the colonial and immediate post-independence eras."<sup>6</sup> Therefore modern art in Africa cannot be seen "as mimicry of its Euro-American counterparts, but as the outcome of a conscious examination and questioning" of issues that arise from the complexities of its heritage.<sup>7</sup> This demands that it experience, produce, create, and reimagine modernism on its own terms and timeline, again and again.

Coming from entirely different fields of art history, but also grappling with systemic marginalization within it, Linda Nochlin also reminds us that the presumed and eternal asymmetries of creativity and intellect that organize Western art history are obviously untenable even "in" "the West," and insistence on upholding them to maintain the dominance of a Western view of the world must be continually rejected.<sup>8</sup> To support the claims I am making through

Okeke-Agulu and Nochlin, if one looks at modernism in Africa through local advocacy for arts education, approaches begin to appear that decenter Europe, opening our lines of sight in ways I find productive for the Caribbean.

We see artistic modernism erupt in the Maghreb in the 1920s with the establishment of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, stimulating the careers of artists like Mahmoud Mukhtar and leading to the cultivation of new generations of modern and contemporary artists who would include Gazbia Sirry (figs. 1a–c). One sees it emerge in Nigeria through the work of artists like Ben Enwonwu and Uzo Egonu (figs. 2a and 2b), and in the Sudan with the work of artists like Ibrahim El-Salahi and the Hurufiyya art movement (fig. 3). The modern case has been made for photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé in Mali, as well as for Ernest Cole in South Africa and a second modernist movement there a generation later in the work of Santu Mofokeng (figs. 4a–c). There were artists working in and stimulating self-described modernist movements across the continent in Morocco, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and again and again in Nigeria with the Osogbo and Nsukka Group.



Figure 1a. Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Egypt's Renaissance (Nahdat Misr)*, 1919–28, Cairo University Gate. Pink granite; 276 × 315 in at base





Figure 1b. Mahmoud Mukhtar, *On the Banks of the Nile*, ca. 1930. Cast bronze; 24 1/8 in.

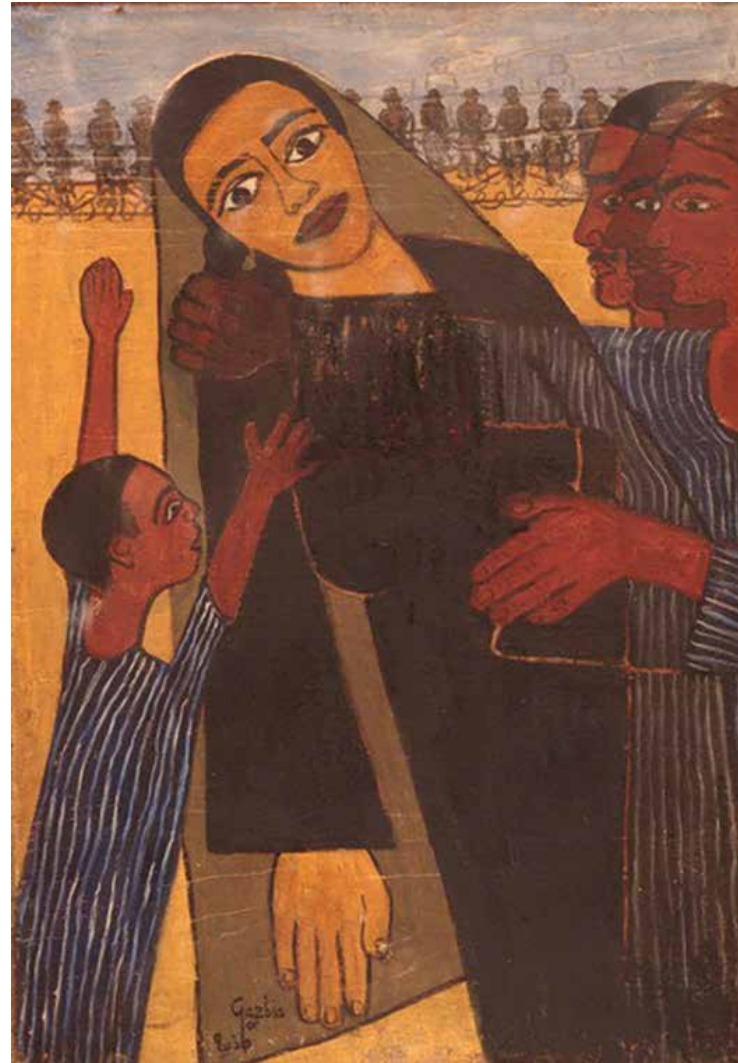


Figure 1c. Gazbia Sirry, *Om Saber*. Oil on canvas, 1952

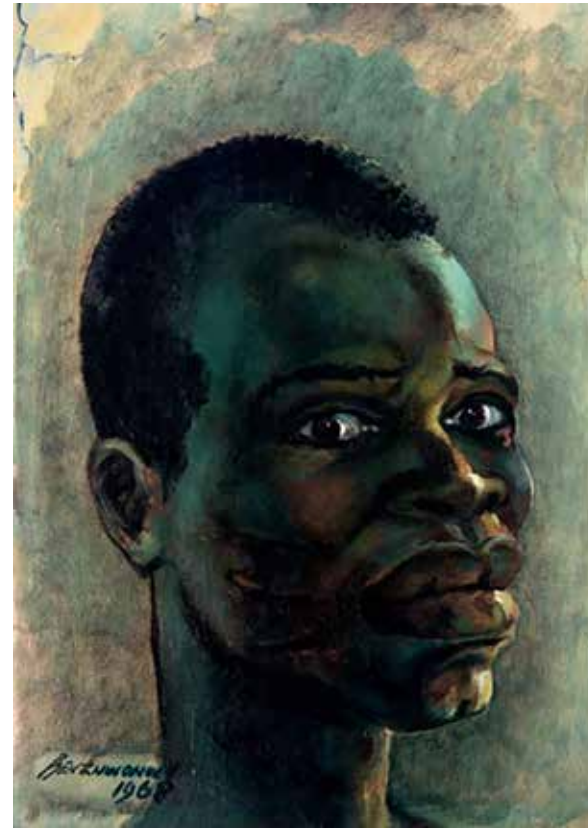


Figure 2a. Ben Enwonwu, *Portrait of Ben Enwonwu's Driver*, 1968. Watercolor; 18 1/2 x 13 in



Figure 2b. Uzo Egonu, *Nkrumah*, 1962. Oil on canvas; 167 x 122 cm



Figure 3. Ibrahim El-Salahi, *Self Portrait of Suffering (Gesicht)*, 1961. Oil on canvas; 11-5/16 x 16 in.





Figure 4a. Seydou Keita, *Two Ladies*, ca. 1950s



Figure 4b. Malick Sidibé, *Je suis fou des disques (I am crazy for records)*, 3 November 1973. Gelatin silver print; 14 × 9% in.



Figure 4c. Ernest Cole, *Changeover*, South Africa, 1960s

But what was or is the character of modernism in each of these instances in Africa? In these different sites, with different and at times related historical trajectories, modernism generally focused on localized creative practices and/or subjects in conversation with global movements. Their self-expression exhibits an innovative use of the materials and technologies of the times, as well as critical engagement of media and aesthetic forms for contemplation and discussion. Each case shows signs of temporal condensation, which means that what might have taken Europe a hundred years to develop, Africa processes in ten to bring it in step with contemporary practices. The work also exhibits postcolonial, self-critical authorship, or what I describe as *autohistoriography*, where subjectivity is affirmed and value self-determined. The art evidences a reconsideration of history and cultural knowledge as critical resources and meaning and intention beyond form. These overarching ideas also repeat, enouncing in a very particularized manner according to the location and culture.

Okeke-Agulu posits that to recognize the critical shifts of modernism on the continent, Africans must reject the notion that modernism is inherently a Western phenomenon and attend to the ways it rises “outside of the Paris–New York [nexus] as alternative or parallel modernism.” Following Okeke-Agulu, I also recognize that “it is more meaningful to see modernism not as a closed, historically and geographically situated phenomenon, but as a constellation of formal and conceptual strategies adopted by artists everywhere who, exploiting ideas and expressive forms from within and outside of their cultural contexts, fashioned new ways of seeing and experiencing the modern through art.”<sup>9</sup> As Africa—so must the Caribbean.

### Caribbean Modernisms as Phenomenology

What might this mean for the Caribbean, and specifically for my practice as an art historian? Rather than asking when was Caribbean modernism, my questions remain nonlinear ones in the present tense: When *is* Caribbean modernism? When does it erupt? When does it become visible across time and space?



Following my interpretation of Okeke-Agulu's position, I think of Caribbean modernism as phenomenological,<sup>10</sup> not as a specific time period or era, occurring across the Caribbean geography at the same time, but as a series of eruptions or critical formations through arts and letters, a series that is not time-bound, is somewhat unpredictable but never-the-less emerges and reemerges as artistic and cultural forms in response to the need for reformation and subjective positioning within the world. In fine art it manifests as the intellectual freedom to critique, define, and author from the inside out, in the midst of and in opposition to forces that seek to contain the unraveling episteme of "the West."

Though created around 1500 on the rechristened island of Hispaniola, I think of the Pigorini Zemi as a modern object. King Christophe's formation of an art academy in 1816 Haiti was a profoundly modern exercise, as was his commissioning of his portrait in the wake of the ultimate example of Caribbean modernity, the Haitian Revolution. I think of C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, written 130 years later and centered on that eruption, as the quintessential Caribbean modernist text, just as Anténor Firmin's *De l'égalité des races humaines* (*The Equality of the Human Races*) had been fifty years before.

To me, modernism in the global Caribbean is shaped by imbricating forces—the economic, cultural, historical, and epistemic impact of colonialism, indentureship, and slavery. Caribbeans create out of, in the midst of, despite, and in critical response to these forces and their afterlives because to render ourselves, to create, and see ourselves outside of a colonial lens requires this.

Guided by the work of a host of theorists—José Lezama Lima as well as Walter Mignolo and his engagement with the work of Aníbal Quijano (which calls for epistemic disobedience),<sup>11</sup> Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and George Yancy to name a few—I have been writing about the phenomenological qualities of Caribbean modernism, perhaps even its

consciousness through the work of various artists—including Simone Leigh, Juan Francisco Elso, Michael Richards, and Jamaican dancehall star Supercat<sup>12</sup>—while also thinking about institutions or convening sites that became places of Caribbean contact at various points in time, from the Art Students League in the 1930s–60s to Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte in the 1980s and '90s and the Edna Manley school of art in the late 1980s–2000s, and so on, but also Paris in the 1920s and '30s but also 1950s and '60s London and now Miami, and so on.<sup>13</sup> I want to focus here on the work of Yancy, Lezama Lima, and Wynter to give a sense of the stakes of Caribbean modernism in colonialism and *after*,<sup>14</sup> and to support my argument for its phenomenological character through works of art.

In a discussion of colonized Black bodies, Yancy speaks of the "reactive value" of Blackness in the self/other dialectic that organizes the West's perception of itself and how its counter-meaning or signification is scripted onto Blackness to establish proof of concept. Quoting Emmanuel Levinas at the end of this observation, he observes that the European colonialism that shaped the Caribbean and the Americas was "a form of deep existential trauma, dispossession, displacement, oppression, and physical and psychological murder. It is messianic and imperialistic. . . . resulting in the disruption and devastation of the lived cultural, teleological space of native people."<sup>15</sup> Yancy continues, "Colonial invasive powers bring with them their own myths, beliefs, and forms of colonial ordering which create a bifurcated form of hierarchy that is designed to distinguish between the natives and the colonizers, a form of hierarchy, where the colonizer (white, good, intelligent, ethical, beautiful, civilized) is superior in all things, while the native (dark, exotic, sexually uncontrollable, bad, stupid, ugly, savage, backward) is inferior. Hence, colonialism is a form of violent usurpation that disrupts the psychosocial equilibrium of those indigenous to their lived cultural cosmos."<sup>16</sup> And here quoting Levinas directly, Yancy asserts that colonialism violently ruptures "[the natives'] continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance."<sup>17</sup> The European modern age that

the colonized recalls as one of death, rape, violence, disease, dispossession, and slavery is viewed, as Yancy reminds us, as “an age of exploration, as an age of courage, fortitude, and faith” on the part of Europe.<sup>18</sup> Western modernism therefore presents a Euro-humanist vision of the world that astoundingly sets aside the violence that made it.

Reflecting on the tragedy of Saartje Baartman in this world, Yancy observes, “What the colonizer knows about the colonized constitutes what the colonized is. Perception, epistemology, and ontology are collapsed. With regard to the Black/native/colonized, what is seen is what is known, and what is known is what is seen. Moreover, what is known and seen or seen and known is what there is.”<sup>19</sup> Taking in Yancy with a healthy dose of Césaire and Fanon, I am not primarily interested in what we know of and can speak about colonialism. I am interested in how visual artists create in the midst of colonialism and in colonized spaces, how they make art that deconstructs and reveals its machinations, questions the material evidence of its assumed wake, works against its epistemological formation to reveal its lies, but also in process creates something larger than mere exposure or resistance through art. I am interested in how artists *make modern*.

In this I have been guided by—in fact somewhat obsessed with—a conversation David Scott had with Sylvia Wynter where she recalls her time as an emerging writer, and a conversation she had with Elsa Goveia on what to create or do. Very clear-eyed and seemingly sharing the perspective of Yancy albeit fifty years before him, Goveia suggested that Wynter create work in response to this question, and here I slightly paraphrase: “How do you deal with the stereotyped view of yourself that you yourself have been socialized to accept?”<sup>20</sup> In other words, How does one push back against the weight of a colonial definition of oneself to define, affirm, and continually recreate oneself, to claim and enact freedom as a decolonial act?

I see Caribbean modernism as decolonial action. If, as Yancy states, “what the colonizer knows about the colonized constitutes what the colonized is. Perception, epistemology, and ontology are collapsed. . . . What is seen is what is known, and what is known is what is seen,” then finding answers to Goveia’s question becomes a critical study of the ways artists catalyze Caribbean modern art practices through their work.

In answer to Goveia’s question of how Caribbean people to make art—amid criticisms of misrecognition, anachronism, mimicry, or whatever concept is deployed to contain it—José Lezama Lima posits that if “we speak of *criticism as creation*, not production, then poetry (fine art) adheres to the theory of knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> As my extended engagement with this piece of writing indicates, I am enamored by the infinite possibilities of this statement.

Just as Okeke-Agulu recognized in relation to Africa, Caribbean people are not European. We too cannot do European modernism. Instead as Lima posits, “We must look for another approach, finding creation, finding pain, in everything. One culture assimilated or unassimilated by another is not a comfort; indeed, no one has given it away as a gift. It is instead a painful act, one that is both creative and created.”<sup>22</sup> Here Lima illumines that within the arts of the Caribbean, criticism of Western epistemes is enacted through *the act of creation*. This is a fundamental characteristic of Caribbean modernism. It is generative as critique in its thingness as phenomena and moves beyond it. Resistance is not enough. We must imagine beyond material Babylons. We must create. We must make and build.

How did Wynter respond to Goveia’s question? She wrote the novel *The Hills of Hebron*. And frankly I cannot get this out of my mind. She responded to the question in the moment by making art, writing a novel. But not just any novel, a text, grounded in Jamaican Bedwardism as the basis of her epic narrative. It is the same form of world-making Kei Miller takes up a few generations later to create art through the novel *Augustown*.

What I came to realize through Wynter and Lima is that for many Caribbean visual artists, consciously or unconsciously, their work responds to Goveia's question through Lima's creation. I have come to realize that Caribbean modernism—especially in the visual arts—not only works to confront, expose, and neuter Western modernism's mythologies of its others but also offers powerful examples of Caribbean visioning and revisioning; it critiques through creation. As creation, it is fundamentally future-driven.

The Cuban artist Juan Francisco Elso once said that the Caribbean, and the Americas more broadly, had everything it needed to create epic art. I have not only become a believer, I am committed to thinking through how this often multimodal epic art created by visionaries like Elso takes form in and as an answer to Goveia's question.

If we extend Scott's notion of the problem-space to see that what is created and becomes emergent in such spaces is independent of fixed notions of place and time, what might become possible through art?<sup>23</sup> How might we begin to approach the complexities and beautiful confidence within the work of global Caribbean artists, drawing in African art practices, Western art histories, Indian and Chinese visualities and culture, dancehall, rake n scrape, soca music and literature, festival arts, modern languages, belief systems, fashion, and other nonpaper archives? When one starts to think dimensionally in this way, things start to get real pretty. As the reggae artist Capleton chats, *follow mi*.

One can see eruptions of Caribbean modernism not only in eighteenth-century Haiti but also in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries (figs. 5a–c). Like the Africans—there were Cuban modern artists in the 1920s and '40s, as well as the '80s, '90s, and 2000s. Since 1492, there have been modern eruptions in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Trinidad, Suriname, Guyana, Barbados, everyone making their way. Modern artists emerged in Jamaica in the 1920s and '30s but also the 1960s,

'90s, and again in the 2000s. They also did so in the Bahamas of the late nineteenth century, then the 1960s, but also the '80s and now. Once again, What is the art doing that makes it modern? The work draws on the Caribbean as resource. Caribbean histories and cultures fuel contemporary art. It takes up Caribbean modern forms, language, faith (Wynter and Miller's Bedwardism), carnival performance, and music as critical resources in the fine arts. It is art that in turn becomes both critical and theoretical form. The work rethinks, remakes, reimagines, and rewrites what has been presented as history. The artists bring their whole selves to the creative experience—without apology—to produce epic art; and it repeats (figs. 6a–c).



Figure 5a. Richard Evans, *Henri Christophe*, 1816. Oil on board; 34 1/4 × 25 1/2 in.



Figure 5b. Hector Hyppolite, *The Great Master*, 1946–48. Oil on cardboard; 37 × 25 in.





Figure 5c. Tessa Mars, *Rèv libète, rèv lanmò I* (Dream of freedom, dream of death I), 2016. Acrylic on paper; 50 x 40 in.

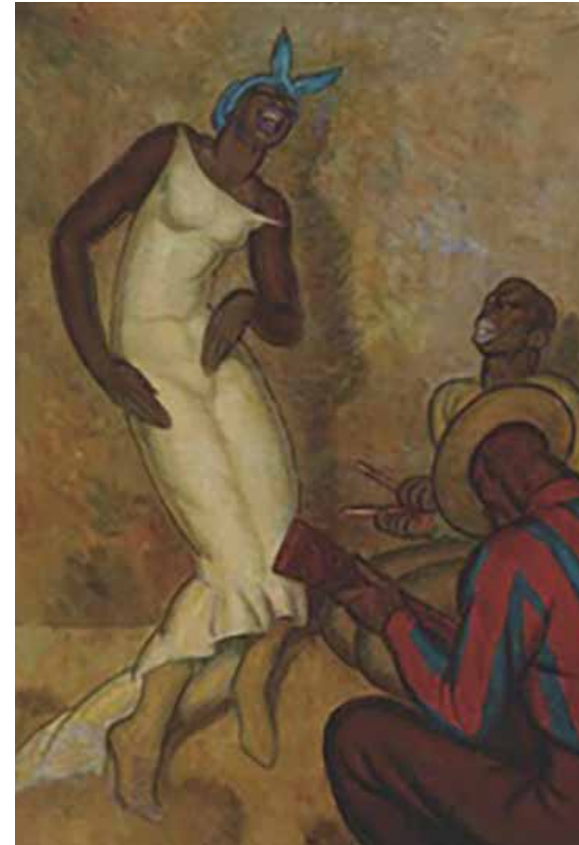


Figure 6a. Jaime Valis, *La rumba*, 1928. Oil on canvas; 37 1/2 x 2-2/5 in.



Figure 6b. Sandú Darié, untitled, ca. 1950. Mixed media on canvas; 29 x 37-2/5 in.



Figure 6c. Marta María Pérez Bravo, *Parallel Cults*, 1990

### Caribbean Modernisms in the World

In this final section I want to briefly introduce the artists Hervé Télémaque and Toto Bissainthe and share how I believe their work moves in the world to affirm the phenomenological character of Caribbean modernism and its ability to erupt as needed, where needed.



By looking at modernism in this way, fewer locales, fewer artists, and fewer works fall out of the narrative and more enter, resulting in a more prismatic history. This in turn requires research that rejects the monumentality and assumed authority of a canon and remains in formation, acknowledging what is not known, what has been occluded, and what can become known. Its global character means we can discuss Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling in the contexts of Guyana and Great Britain without setting aside Philip Moore in Guyana, who was also a great modern artist and thinker but is underknown and slipping away from us by the day, which breaks my heart. In knowing Moore, we can understand Williams's and Bowling's work more intimately.

In Haiti, as the work of Lindsay Twa and Jerry Philogene shows, we can look at the artists around the Centre d'Art as Haitian modernists, and I do not disagree. But if one is not temporally and spatially bound, thinking phenomenologically, we can also include multimodal incarnations like Télémaque and Bissainthe in the conversation. Their work not only tests the dominance of Western modernism's single narrative but also demands that its multiplicity become fundamental to understanding modernisms through art as theoretical form.

Increasingly, I do not think we can fully comprehend the visual in Caribbean art without considering other modern forms such as language, faith, music, and performance. In addition, scholarship has thus far been so focused on Great Britain and the United States as cultural interlocutors of the Caribbean that we ignore the work of artists who instead went to or eventually turned toward Bogotá, Lima, Mexico City, or Caracas. They fall out of our regard and history. We need to do work that challenges the narrativization we have become comfortable with, in ways that enlarge rather than disrupt for disruption sake, and I believe a phenomenological approach to Caribbean modernism can be a way forward.

Hervé Télémaque was born into a Haitian family deeply committed to the country's people, revolutionary culture, belief systems, and language. He spent most of his childhood with his maternal grandfather Raphaël Brouard and his uncle Carl Brouard, who cofounded the publications *La Revue Indigène* and *Les Griots* with noted authors Jacques Roumain and Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude.<sup>24</sup> Through these publications, the indigenists, as those gathered around these publications became known, endeavored to “create a literary movement that would be simultaneously national, regional and cosmopolitan,” a movement that “resisted the cultural and political domination of US Occupation” and centered indigenous Haitian approaches to the creative arts, thus exhibiting “cultural independence from France.”<sup>25</sup> This was a remarkable artistic philosophy for Télémaque to be exposed to while young, an unwitting gift that would later manifest in his approach to his work.

Though unsurprisingly drawn to literature, in choosing the visual arts he never left the core values of Haitian indigenism behind. The creative ethos of the indigenists rested on a three-pronged approach to literature that was in every sense a model for decolonial art of the Caribbean and the Americas—or what I describe as Caribbean modernist practices. The ethos of Télémaque's oeuvre not only grounded him as he made his way in the world but also connected him to a Pan-Africanist sensibility that had moved beyond any perceived ironies of its cultivation in Paris by the time of his arrival.

He left Haiti immediately after the ascension of François Duvalier and arrived in New York City in 1957 to attend the Art Students League (fig. 7). Although he was no doubt excited to be in this new capital of the contemporary art world, even as his painting practice took flight, he soon tired of what he described as the “ambient racism” that pervaded the city, and in 1961 he set sail for France.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 7. Hervé Télémaque and Julian Levy at Art Students League, New York, ca. 1958–60

France was a country of which the Haitian-born artist had intimate knowledge. He understood that it was not antiracist or an oppositional space to the United States. However, it was a society with a meaningful, though not unproblematic, history of genuine fascination with Black culture. Petrine Archer-Straw notes that by the 1920s French interest in Black culture was seen by many to be “highly fashionable and a sign of being modern.”<sup>27</sup> The French word for this love and regard was *négrophilie*. Viewed as transgressive and stylish, negrophilia was expressed in myriad ways. At times it “essentialized” Black culture by commodifying it and/or descending into stereotype.<sup>28</sup> At other times it cultivated an environment where Black performers such as Josephine Baker became superstars. Between these ex-

tremes, France increasingly was seen as a site of possibility and rest for Black creatives—a place that would continue to attract artists, performers, and students from across the African diaspora for generations.

Télémaque’s work is often thought of in terms of French surrealism, but I want to consider what it may mean to examine his work within the boundless space of (Aimé) Césairean surrealism—as Caribbean modern practice that brings together various approaches that resonated with him personally as he articulated a world grounded in Haiti, tethered to the Americas, France, and Africa, and resonating in the world. Rather than an indexical or essentialist reading of his work, what I am reaching for is a consideration of the formal decisions of his oeuvre and what these encounters gesture toward. I want to explore what I see in the curiosity he expresses between appearances and substance; tensions between the symbolic and the “real”; the interstitial space of masking and what it may mean when a Black Haitian artist deploys stereotypical images with deep signifying histories in popular culture in his work. I want to mull over what becomes possible when paintings code switch in the frame from Vodun to abstract expressionism to surrealism, from Dada to pop, and back again, across time, across space as a phenomenon, as Caribbean modernism in the world.

When I look at Télémaque’s art, like *Le soutien-gorge* (The bra, 1960) (fig. 8), or *One of the 360,000 Marines over the Antilles* (1965), I sense an antihierarchical ethos that pervades formal choices and that is also deeply political. I see work turning corners and collapsing space, exhibiting an antigravitational pull over floating objects. I see constant movement between figure and ground across the canvas, an artist crossing matrix boundaries to make sculptural paintings, defying the authority of the rectangle and the flat surface. And I see fragmented and exploded figures pregnant with signs and signification, playing hide-and-seek. At times, the technique and flow of paint suggests a transposability that signifies—perhaps seen more clearly in his work in the early 1980s, ’90s, and early 2000s.





Figure 8. Hervé Télémaque, *Le soutien-gorge* (The bra), 1960. Oil on canvas; 65 x 73 1/2 in.

By the 2000s Télémaque had returned to Haiti multiple times after long absences and traveled to more than a dozen African countries. In Africa, he expressed particularly fond memories of Cotonou, Benin, and historic Dahomey, the ancestral home of many Haitians. The paintings he created in response to those experiences speak through medium, form, and composition to notions of accumulation as form of a life lived around navigable paths. Two notable paintings from the period feature the Haitian modernist Hector Hyppolite, whom Télémaque revered, as subject: *Le voyage d'Hector Hyppolite en Afrique*, nos. 1 and 2 (2000) (fig. 9).



Figure 9. Hervé Télémaque, *Le voyage d'Hector Hyppolite en Afrique no. 2*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas; 63-4/5 x 95-7/10 in.

These works exhibit all the formal considerations of painting that he had become known for by that time. But they also conceptualize the objects as something more than their literal selves, as *poto mitans* between Hyppolite, a former houngan or Vodun priest, who claimed that he had been initiated into Vodun in Dahomey, to which he dreamed of returning, and Télémaque. In the realm of the surrealist marvelous, which the spiritual realm of Haitian Vodun can be seen as a doorway to and the *poto mitan* its pathway between the material and spiritual worlds, it becomes possible for Hyppolite to mount or possess the artist to achieve his desired return. If one opens one's mind to this possibility, it becomes easier to think



of these works registering as Hyppolite's spiritual return to a place he longed for through Télémaque's physical return to Benin. But this is not a Caribbean romance of the past. As Durozoi notes, Télémaque does not romanticize Haiti or Africa in these works.<sup>29</sup> Neither is a utopia. Instead, the two paintings encourage their audience to imagine a fuller experience of this axis beyond the stereotypes, an axis that is imperfect, challenged, and yet magnificent. Hyppolite offers us the possibility of moving in the world beyond physical and material barriers. In Caribbean modernism, the spiritual or metaphysical can also become a conceptual beginning.

In works like *Toussaint Louverture à New York* (Toussaint Louverture in New York, 1960) (fig. 10), we see the artist make an incredible claim for belonging through process, historical reference, and signifying imagery. If one can imagine Toussaint Louverture, pictured with his famous white horse as a multiple signifier—think: one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (“behold a white horse,” Revelation 6:2), St. George, and Don Quixote—as synecdoche for the artist's own experiences in the city, the pathos of the work is amplified through the use of the abstract expressionist approach that dominated New York painting at the time. Here, Césaire's interpretation of surrealism aligns with Télémaque's method of taking in multiple forms, methods, histories, and experiences, which may first appear to be in opposition, and have them resonate in a single work: abstract expressionism, realism and surrealism, Dada, and Haitian history all congeal in the work to test new possibilities.

Hervé Télémaque's oeuvre answers Goveia's question. Through content, form, and approach it asserts its recognition of colonial, racial, epistemic, disciplinary, and social disfigurement, even as every painting works to neutralize these lenses. At times, the encounter is with art history, sometimes it is personal and at other times it is an encounter with the racism of the United States and France and the denigration of Black people more broadly. At times, it tussles with essentialized Blackness, indexicality, and society's refusal to see the work



Figure 10. Hervé Télémaque, *Toussaint Louverture à New York*, 1960. Oil on canvas; 70 x 77 in.

of diasporic artists in its fullness. At times, it is aesthetic, material, and formal, but in every case, Télémaque affirms complete freedom as an artist to inhabit the Césairean marvelous of Caribbean modernism.



When he passed away (*disparut*), as his death announcement noted in November 2022, Téliémaque requested that his family play the song “Solèy Danmbalab” as sung by Toto Bissainthe to carry him over. He wanted her voice and music to send him “home” over the waters. Loosely translated, *Solèy Danmbalab* means “unstoppable sun” or “enlightenment,” to usher or allow light in. It was an invocation both artists took very seriously as they produced decolonial work.

By the time Téliémaque arrived in Paris in the early 1960s, Toto Bissainthe was already there, in a city that had emerged as one of the most active spaces for Black global arts. I remain fascinated by the work Alioune Diop’s *Présence Africaine* did in cultivating what we understand very clearly today as diasporic culture. By the 1960s American jazz was a part of French music, and Katherine Dunham regularly toured France with her troupe. American artists and writers such as James Baldwin, Romare Bearden, Herb Gentry, Richard Wright, and many others, alongside African writers and filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène and Timité Bassori, as well as the French-Guadeloupean filmmaker Sarah Maldoror, all called it home. Bissainthe was there to experience it all. She is a fascinating figure, an important rhizome in diaspora, extending the ways the Caribbean enounces itself in the modern world. Thinking of her work in relation to Téliémaque’s enlarges our understanding of their practices and highlights the multimodal, phenomenological dimension of Caribbean modernism.

Like Téliémaque in terms of history, literature, painting, and activism, Bissainthe carried the music and culture of Haiti everywhere she went. She was born Marie Clotilde Bissainthe in 1934 in Cap Haitien and left in the 1950s to study in Paris, always thinking she would soon return. She did return briefly in the early 1960s during the Duvalier regime and was soon forced to return to life as an artist in exile—first to New York City and then France. She did not return to Haiti until 1986, two months before the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier. Tragically, she died in Haiti less than ten years later in June 1994 at the relatively young age of sixty.

Bissainthe’s music, which had become so important to Téliémaque, was grounded in Haitian folk and Vodun music. Following her time in Haiti in the early 1960s, she began singing seriously in 1962. She perfected the expressive tonalities and body movement inherent in Haitian Kreyòl—a modern Caribbean language. To hear the voice is only half the communication, as a performative language, the body hones meaning and intent in Kreyòl, and Bissainthe became an expert in this (fig. 11).



Figure 11. Toto Bissainthe, *Chante Haïti* (album cover), 1977

While in Paris during the burgeoning late 1950s, she had extended the scope of performance in her work, becoming a fundamental part of the African diasporic arts scene not as a French person but as a Haitian exile artist in Paris. Paris was as much a Caribbean modern space at the time as it was an African and African American modernist arena. In the 1950s and '60s the primary generative space for diasporic artists circled around Diop's *Présence Africaine*. There, along with the Ivorian filmmaker and writer Timité Bassori, the Senegalese actor Ababacar Samb Makharam, and Sarah Maldoror, Bissainthe formed the group Les Griots, the first Black theater company in France, situating both her and Télémaque within a particular thinking space, one that intentionally places their artistic philosophy and practice in conversation with the thinkers and creatives—African, Caribbean, American, in diaspora—who recognized the creolized foundations of their politics and the work their art needed to do.

Les Griots was active in various forms from 1955–56 to 1972 (fig. 12). They performed mostly in France and Africa and included work from throughout the diaspora in their repertoire. A number of its members, including Bissainthe, entered the film industry as actors and directors. Sarah Maldoror, Les Griots' first leader, left the group when she decided to go to film school. She studied at Vladimir Gardin's film school (now the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography) in Moscow, under Mark Donskoy, where she found herself in classes with Sembène. When they returned to Paris, Sembène began working on his first feature film and needed someone to voice its main character. No doubt through Maldoror, he found Toto Bissainthe. Toto became the voice of Douana in *Black Girl*, considered the first African modernist feature film. Does her presence and work in it also make it Caribbean? I would say yes because the creative synergy present in Paris at the time worked prismatically.

In the 1980s, as Euzhan Palcy developed her film *La rue Cases-Nègres* (*Sugarcane Alley*, 1983), whether she knew it or not, she turned to the actors who had gathered together in



Figure 12. Les Griots with Bashir Touré, Roger Blin, Toto Bissainthe, unidentified man, Lydia Ewandé, Robert Liensol, and Danièle Van Berkeycke, n.d. Studio Bermand, Paris

Les Griots, including, as Médouze, Doua Seck (b. 1919 in Mali), who had played Henri Christophe in the company's production of Aimé Césaire's *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, most notably at Dakar's Negro Festival of the Arts in 1966. Darling Légitimus played the lead character's grandmother. She had performed with Les Griots in Paris in the first production of Jean Genet's *Les nègres* (*The Blacks*) ever staged. None of these artists and performers ceded their cultural identity in this space, nor did they naively assume that being in the space contributed nothing to their being. Paris was the space where they became modern artists and performers, producing work that carried their entire histories with them. Some

remained, others returned, others negotiated lives in multiple sites. Télémaque stayed but eventually Bissainthe returned to Haiti.

She would go on to become better known to US and Caribbean audiences in Raoul Peck's films *Haitian Corner* (1987) and *L'homme sur les quais* (*Man by the Shore*, 1993). Her dear friend and colleague Sarah Maldoror would become a key "African" filmmaker, sharing the political urgencies of her partner, Mário Pinto de Andrade (one of the founders of the Angolan Communist Party and of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), and making the award-winning film *Sambizanga* (1972), centered on Angola's struggle. Like Bissainthe, Maldoror's commitment to a critical decolonizing Caribbean art remained throughout her life, as seen in the three films she made on Aimé Césaire as well as the short focused on her great friend Toto Bissainthe.

Télémaque, Bissainthe, and their circle of artists were committed to answering Goveia's question through their work, a commitment that did not dim no matter where they were in the world. Though circumstances ensured that they would work most often outside the geographic Caribbean and with artists not deemed "Caribbean," they nevertheless forged meaningful creative connections that exhibit the pointedly decolonizing ethos and aesthetics that lie at the heart of Caribbean modernism in all forms. My larger project focuses on the phenomenology of this work and marks Télémaque and Bissainthe as Caribbean modernists reimagining and deploying their artwork as critical forms through their creation. This project attends to the work their art does beyond the point of catalysis, in order to imagine the infinite contours of Caribbean modernist art in the world.

## Reprise

### Solèy Danmbalab (Solèy Dambala)

Solèy, ooo  
Atidan Ibo Loko, solèy  
Mwen pa moun isit ooo, solèy  
Mwen se nèg ginen ooo, solèy  
M pa vini pou m rete, solèy  
Men batiman mwen chavire, solèy ooo  
Solèy, solèy ooo  
. . .  
Fè yon vèvè pou lwa  
Apreti oungan mwen  
Fè yon vèvè pou lwa  
Apreti oungan mwen . . .

Oh, sun  
Atidan Ibo Loko, oh Sun  
I am not from here, oh Sun  
I am from Africa, oh Sun  
I am not here to stay, Sun  
But my boat has capsized, oh Sun  
Sun, oh Sun  
. . .  
Draw a vèvè for the lwa  
Apreti, my houngan  
Draw a vèvè for the lwa  
Apreti, my houngan . . .



## Endnotes

- 1 This essay takes its title and its epigraph from a Haitian folk song sung by Toto Bissanthe.
- 2 Sylvia Wynter, in David Scott, “The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe*, no. 8 (September 2000): 131, 134.
- 3 Anne Lafont, remarks, African Art Conference, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA, October 2023.
- 4 Salah M. Hassan, “African Modernism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (2010): 451–72; Chika Okeke Agulu, “The Art Society and the Making of Postcolonial Modernism in Nigeria,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (2010): 505–27.
- 5 Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
- 6 Chika Okeke-Agulu, “Art Historical Perspectives on African Modernism: The Challenge of the Modern—An Introduction,” *African Arts*, Spring 2006, 15.
- 7 Okeke-Agulu, “Art Historical Perspectives on African Modernism,” 15.
- 8 See Linda Nochlin, “From the Archives: The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law,” *Art in America*, September 1, 1973, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/the-realist-criminal-and-the-abstract-law-63236/>.
- 9 Okeke-Agulu, “Art Historical Perspectives on African Modernism,” 15.
- 10 I enact intellectual marronage in my deployment of phenomenology in this essay. I choose not to frame this concept through the intellectual tradition presented by the French school of thinkers. While I find Martin Heidegger’s notion of the “thingness of things” in a work of art compelling, I am interested not in the long road to this idea but rather in one that deploys literally the root word “phenomena” while recognizing its critical ability become a catalytic modern form. See Martin Heidegger, “Origin of a Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans., Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 15–88.
- 11 Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (June 2000): 215–32; Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-colonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009): 160.
- 12 I have thought through these ideas from different perspectives in the following published and soon-to-be-published essays: “Michael Richards and the Politics of Black Ecstasy,” in Anna Kesson and Wayne Modest, eds., *Beyond Boundaries: Seeing Art History from the Caribbean*, Clark Art Institute Special Series (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press / Clark Art Institute, 2025); “La Luz de Cosas,” in Olga Viso, ed., *Juan Francisco Elso: Essays on / Ensayos sobre América* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2023); “Gust of Grace: Simone Leigh’s *Las Meninas*,” in Key Jo Lee, ed., *Perceptual Drift: Black Art and the Ethics of Looking* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and Cleveland Museum of Art, 2022).
- 13 See Erica Moiah James, “Prismatic Blackness: Art Being and Aesthetics in the Global Caribbean,” in Alejandro de la Fuente and David Bindman, eds., *Image of the Black in Western Art: Latin American and Caribbean Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024).
- 14 Though I use the temporally encoded word *after*, this is not to say that I view colonialism as history. To the contrary, it continues to live in new forms and as such continues its devastation. Postcolonialism is not yet a lived reality, though it has been a very successful intellectual project.
- 15 George Yancy, “Colonial Gazing: The Production of the Body as Other,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 1 (2008): 4.
- 16 Yancy, “Colonial Gazing,” 4.
- 17 Yancy, “Colonial Gazing,” 4; citing Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21.
- 18 Yancy, “Colonial Gazing,” 4; citing L. R. Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 2.
- 19 Yancy, “Colonial Gazing,” 7.
- 20 Wynter, in Scott, “The Re-enchantment of Humanism,” 131, 134.
- 21 José Lezama Lima, “Julián del Casal,” trans. Robin Myers, *Small Axe*, no. 60 (November 2019): 133.
- 22 Lezama Lima, “Julián del Casal,” 131–34.
- 23 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 12.
- 24 *Hervé Télémaque: Trottoirs d’Afrique à l’acrylique*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Galerie Louis Carré, 2001), 45.
- 25 Kevin Meehan and Marie Léticée, “A Folio of Writing from *La Revue Indigène* (1927–28): Translation and Commentary,” *Callaloo* 23, no. 4 (2000): 1377–80.
- 26 It would be prudent to define key terms as deployed in the context of Télémaque’s work. These are words we hear often but that, like most things in the current political climate, may have their meaning co-opted and turned to signify the opposite of what is intended. In making a claim of artistic and intellectual freedom for Hervé Télémaque’s global Caribbean modernism I do not want to be misunderstood. The first term is *ambient racism*. This refers to discrimination and prejudice against a particular group based on a perception of racial difference, and the superiority of one group over the other based on that distinction. It is “ambient” because it is immersive, pervasive, all-encompassing, so much so that its perpetrators and at times the victims can appear to be unconscious of it. While there is no such thing as unconscious bigotry, the manner of delivery can enter one’s subconscious. Télémaque refers to ambient racism in his work often through the depiction of various obvious and less obvious stereotypes and products aimed to describe both Black insufficiency or the “Black grotesque,” and methods to “improve” the Black body, specifically hair straighteners and skin-lightening products.
- 27 Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 9.
- 28 *Essentialize*: To misrepresent a person or group by reducing their entire being to a limited notion or essence. It relies on checking stereotypical boxes even in the face of evidence to the contrary. In terms of art, it was once expressed through assertions that Black artists did not practice abstraction or understand it—any attempts they made were accused of being inauthentic. For the French, Blackness was associated with the allure of difference and the exotic, the hypersexual and sensuous, and notions of freedom interpreted through the primitive.
- 29 Gérard Durozoi, “Trottoirs d’Afrique / African Sidewalks,” in *Hervé Télémaque: Trottoirs d’Afrique à l’acrylique*, (Paris: Galerie Louis Carré & Cie, 2001), 16.