Creole Semiotics:
Contemporary Caribbean Art and Creolization

By

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To the families that inspire me to be a better person—the Guerreros, the Medinas, and the Sheas. And to the one in whose eyes I always saw love and tenderness—my beloved grandmother, Chola.

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Abstract

This dissertation puts the thinking of Édouard Glissant in contact with Caribbean visual arts to offer a way of accounting for Caribbean art's often unacknowledged participation in the process of creolization. Through this double interpretive move, I posit how the concepts and analytic tools developed by Glissant—particularly in his *Caribbean Discourse* (1981) and *Poetics of Relation* (1990)—can open a way of not only illustrating Caribbean art's contribution to creolization but also of counteracting the tendency to expropriate creolization and other related concepts as an abstracted metaphor for globalization. I carry out my argument by dividing the dissertation into two parts with two chapters forming each section. In the first part, "Art History and Creolization," I contrast recent international exhibitions and publications with examples in the visual arts through the lens of Creole studies. The two chapters that make up this section ask us to reconsider the modes in which the Caribbean and its art has been presented in discourses surrounding global contemporary arts and think, instead, of the entangled, incomplete, and counter-archival ways in which to discuss its art as a process that defies positivist definitions. In the second part, "Creolizing Art History," I develop the concept of Creole semiotics. Through the analysis of artworks from the Pan-Caribbean region—including works by artists from the Anglophone area (Christopher Cozier, Joscelyn Gardner, and Janine Antoni), the Francophone region (Jean-Ulrick Désert, Hervé Beuze, and Rigaud Benoit), and the Spanish-speaking islands (Miguel Luciano, Regina José Galindo, Quisqueya Henríquez, Felix González-Torres, and Álvaro Barrios)—I show how Creole semiotics allows us to trace differences but also repetitions across a series of iconic signs that recur in the arts of the region. Extending the field of Creole linguistics and poststructuralist semiotics to Caribbean visual arts, I articulate how Creole semiotics provides a method for studying Caribbean art as a chain of signifiers that form a visual syntax or common vocabulary that links the arts of the different countries in the region in a floating chain of signifiers that include islands, boats, and the sea as the ultimate sign and agent of creolization.

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Introduction:
The Artistic Shores of the Caribbean

> Creolization, one of the ways of forming a complex mix—and not merely a linguistic result—is only exemplified by its processes and certainly not by the 'contents' on which these operate. -Édouard Glissant[1]

> What is the Caribbean in fact?
> A multiple series of relationships. -Édouard Glissant[2]

In his chapter "Tell about Your Trip: Michel Leiris," published in 1988 in *The Predicament of Culture*, anthropologist James Clifford begins his last paragraph with this pronouncement: "We are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos."[3] While his intentions were most likely directed toward summing up the figure of Michel Leiris, an ethnographer credited with denouncing the colonizing attitudes of the field of anthropology, it is nonetheless difficult not to read the statement as patronizing. A paradox, indeed, since in his chapter Clifford praises Leiris for refusing to adopt a hierarchical and detached narrative position in Leiris's *L'Afrique fântome* published in 1934. In his dictum, however, Clifford assumes a collective voice in the form of an undefined "we." But, who are those people who *now* find it advantageous to arrogantly assume the demonym "Caribbean"? What happened before this collective "we" became Caribbean? More importantly, what happened to those Caribbeans before the collective "we" became them?

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[1] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 89.

[2] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 139.

[3] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 173.

The boldness of Clifford's assertion does not quite line up with Leiris's intellectual position. In the 1950s, Leiris sought to accord equal importance to "Third World ethnography," encouraging researchers from these parts of the world to study European societies.[4] Put differently, the simple identification with the Other declared in "We are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos" is not only a gross overstatement but it is also an overgeneralization of Leiris's goals for the field of ethnography. Leiris, meanwhile, had a student at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris in the early 1950s who would become what he called a "native ethnographer" and one of the leading voices of the Caribbean—Édouard Glissant. A writer, literary critic, and an overall intellectual more than an ethnographer, Glissant would dedicate his life to examining the critical complexity of the Caribbean that Clifford so swiftly erases in his pronouncement.

I bring up Clifford's assessment to call attention to a general attitude of co-optation of the Caribbean not only in the areas of anthropology but also, in what concerns this dissertation, the field of art history. More precisely, while Caribbean art history is still not part of the master narrative of Western art, the Caribbean and "Caribbeanness" are now invoked to describe contemporary art and a contemporary condition. Regarding what I call the first mode of excision of the Caribbean from the writing of art history, Leon Wainwright has smartly stated:

> My starting point is that there has been a refusal to accept the coevalness or simultaneity of art stories across continents. This has led a primary role in ensuring the almost complete subtraction of the Caribbean from the discipline of art history. C.L.R. James showed that the Caribbean is "in but not of the West," a description that is indicative of its relationship to dominant historiography…. Within discourses of modern art, the same [anthropological] historicism has framed attention to "primitivism," with its conflation of spatial and temporal distance, in which the art of others would "appear to us as present visages of our

[4] Celia Britton, "Ethnography as Relation: The Significance of the French Caribbean in the Ehtnographic Writing of Michel Leiris," *Film Studies* LXVI, no. 1: 46.

> own pasts." This historicism is among the reasons why art history has failed to contemplate the Caribbean…. With historicism comes the accusation of anachronism that has been an impediment to many Caribbean artists' efforts to claim their place as artists. They have been forced to negotiate the view that their art was "behind the times," the challenge of being regarded as somehow lagging behind the newest development in the art of their day.[5]

With the advent of critical theory (formed by postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial thought) as a new way in which to reorient the discipline of art history, different interpretative tools have been applied particularly to the study of contemporary art.[6] A case in point is the concepts and analytic tools developed by Glissant throughout the latter half of the twentieth-century, mainly during the last three decades of his life, about the Caribbean. What is astonishing, however, is the removal of the Caribbean from Glissant's theories, which in recent years have been used as conceptual frameworks that purport to critique and address the power imbalance inherent in what had been the field of art history until recently.[7]

Sociologist Mimi Sheller has been one of the most vocal scholars to denounce what she calls the "theoretical piracy" of, specifically, the term creolization in order to explain the "hegemonic logic of globalization":

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[5] Leon Wainwright, *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), 3-4.

[6] Jae Emerling, *Theory for Art History* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), xii.

[7] A cursory analysis of the top searches in WorldCat for books published in the last decade about art and featuring writings by or about Glissant reveal that while the name of the Martinican author appears prominently in the books' tables of content the opposite can be said of focused studies about Caribbean art. That is, the following books contain reprinted essays by Glissant or interviews done to him; yet, in only one of them—*Baroque New World*—can readers find dedicated studies to the conceptualization of art in the Caribbean: Mosquera, Gerardo, Jean Fisher, and Francis Alÿs. *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture* (New York, N.Y.: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004); Bishop, Claire. *Participation.* (London: Whitechapel, 2006); Barson, Tanya, Peter Gorschlüter, and Petrine Archer Straw. *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic*. (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2010); Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Monika Kaup. *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Belting, Hans, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel. *The global contemporary and the rise of new art worlds*. (London: The MIT Press, 2013).

> If the Caribbean was once erased from the time-space of Western modernity, it has now been voraciously sucked into the vortex of "global culture." Creolization is today posted as a condition that we are "all" experiencing in a context of "globalization," defined as the increasingly rapid interchange of capital, information, people, and cultural objects between far-flung parts of the world, and a reflexive consciousness of that interconnectedness.[8]

With the growing tendency toward abstracting the Caribbean comes a second form of excision of the particularities, specificities, and ample gamut of case studies that could, actually, illustrate and support the applicability of the Caribbean to other parts of the world. I see this happening in recent writings about contemporary art history, where the piracy of Glissantian thinking to analyze all but Caribbean art becomes a way of reconstituting the same dominant logic that caused the erasure of the Caribbean from the history of modern Western art in the first place.

There is, yet, a third move or wave not of subtraction but of sourcing that understands Caribbean art as theoretical works in their own right and as crucial parts of (or agents in) the origins of postmodernity and postcolonialism. As such, this dissertation is staked in re-routing the theorization of the Caribbean back into not just an account of Caribbean art history but also the role of Caribbean art as the starting place for theories of the contemporary. Inserting the Caribbean in theories that claim to speak of creolization, syncretism, and hybridity in the arts will bring the dynamism and complexity needed to rehearse and perform in text the phenomena already occurring in art.

As a project stemming from postcolonial theory, this dissertation does not shy away from the question of how creolization has become a concept—by now fashionable in the circuits of global art—that has not been adequately utilized to understand

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[8] Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 188.

contemporary Caribbean art. To be sure, books and essays abound with studies about the syncretic nature of the aesthetics of Afro-Caribbean religions and cultures. For instance, the scholarly work of art historians Judith Bettelheim and Donald Cosentino, just to name a few, comes to mind. Their contribution has been seminal to the philosophical understanding of the transmission and reinvention of belief systems and their translation into creative forms in the African Diaspora, specifically in the field Afro-Caribbean art. In fact, the work of these and other scholars have influenced a generation of younger art historians and curators interested in studying the impact carnivals and other masquerading traditions have had on the discourse and practice of performance art.[9] But the emphasis on artistic practices that have a religious foundation, in my opinion, needs to be balanced by analyses of other forms of art—what some may call the fine arts—in order to complicate the perceived notion that the Caribbean's contribution to the history of art comes largely from the field of religion as understood vis-à-vis the rationality of the West.

The goals and aims of my research stand next to the important contributions of Krista Thompson's *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*, Patricia Mohammed's *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation*, and Erica Moiah James's dissertation "Re-Worlding the World: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary."[10] Published within the last decade, these three scholarly contributions to the arts and visual culture of the Caribbean represent a critical

[9] I am thinking specifically of the exhibition titled *EN MAS': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean* curated by Claire Tancons and Krista Thompson and currently on view at the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans. http://curatorsintl.org/special-projects/en-mas

[10] Krista Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Patricia Mohammed, *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2009); Erica Moiah James, "Re-Worlding the World: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2008). ProQuest (UMI 3383513).

look at how the region entered the visual field of Western art. From Thompson's study about the construction of the Anglo-Caribbean by a British colonial regime concerned with controlling the region's visual and discursive representation, I borrow her intellectual skepticism of the ways the region has been visually imagined by outsiders. The links she draws between tourism and representation in the Caribbean is a topic I discuss but from the point of view of contemporary artists working in the region. Mohammed's concerns with how the collision of major cultural symbols became one of the Caribbean's unique contributions to the field of art and visual culture represents for me one of the most serious attempts at drafting a history that does not seek to insert itself in the genealogy of modernism. I want to advance her thesis by analyzing how the process of signification happens in contemporary Caribbean art from a postcolonial and poststructuralist perspective. One major difference between my project and that of Thompson and Mohammed is that while their studies focus on the arts of the West Indies mine attempts to bring out the connective threads between the three major regions of the Caribbean. With Erica Moiah James's study, I share the preoccupation with the contemporary period where it is possible to see the forging of a counter-narrative that deals directly with the outcomes of colonization and post- and neo-colonization. I admire her attempt at casting a wide net that includes the interpretation of works from Cuba, Haiti, and the English-speaking Caribbean even if each example is analyzed in individual chapters and without much cross-readings between the works. What all of these texts have in common, however, is that they do not purport to be the definite word on Caribbean art. On the contrary, these books and dissertations—including my own—help

demonstrate the growing interest in scholarship that disproves that the arts from this region are derivative of imposed models of modernism.

With these three authors as intellectual models, I hope this dissertation will contribute to the field of Caribbean art by analyzing and interpreting contemporary Caribbean art as a visual representation of the process of creolization. Using Glissantian thinking as an inspiration and as point of departure, how can we start talking about Caribbean art? How can we apply theories of creolization to the visual arts? I have consciously stayed away from exoticizing definitions of *créolité* that would lead me to read the tropical colors, syncopation, warm light, etc., as elements of Creole art the way many Western readers interpret literature from the Caribbean.[11] Instead, I have relied on a translation of the codes present in Glissant's text as my method for analyzing and interpreting contemporary Caribbean art. I pay particular attention to the early ways in which Glissant articulated creolization as a process and not as a fixed form of identity. Specifically, he termed creolization "the experience of diversity and the long-unnoticed process it spawned."[12] As opposed to *métissage* or hybridity, Glissant argued that creolization adds something new to the components that participate in it.[13] To this he added the unpredictable character of creolization; that is, how the experience of colonization and slavery produced unexpected cultural and linguistic results. Thus,

[11] In her book, Sheller makes a comparison between food and language in regard to the way metropolitan societies consume Creole cultures, which I believe can also be extended to art. "In so far as 'Creole *speech* is the source of the stylistic smells of the novels' discourse' (in comparison to metropolitan French novels), as Briton argues, the reader can get closer to the 'exotic' through vicariously consuming the *créolité* of writing as if it were being heard, smelled, and tasted." Ibid., 186.

[12] Édouard Glissant, "Creolization and the Making of the Americas," *Caribbean Quarterly* 54, no. ½ (March-June, 2008): 82; originally published in *Race Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas—A New World View* eds. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (McCormick Adams: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

[13] Ibid.

originality, as understood in the context of creolization, must be seen as unabashedly fragmented, impure, chaotic, and never fully realized. The insistence on creolization being a process that does not aim to reach completeness has to do with an attempt to understand the coming together of cultures as a meeting where loss is unavoidable and from that loss uniqueness follows. Creolization, in short, should be seen as the opposite of universalization.

More concretely, I draw from Glissant's awareness that creolization was first and foremost a theory born in the field of linguistics. Glissant, and others before him, extrapolated the creation of Creole languages to the broader arena of culture. The Martinican writer explains:

> A Creole language, in contrast [to pidgin], does not work within one but almost always two languages or two fields of language, which are its components. For example, the francophone Creole languages of the West Indies, still spoken today by francophone or Anglophone people (in Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia or Dominican Island), consists of fragments of syntax from sub-Saharan West Africa and a lexicon brought to these shores by the francophone Normans and British sailors.[14]

If derived from the syntactical and lexical characteristics of Creole language, creolization thus could be seen as a semiotic system made up of signs originating from diverse sources. In turn, I use this logic to deduce a visual vocabulary made up of signs or icons whose meaning is always already deferred. This is the basis of what I am calling a "Creole semiotics," which is further explored in this thesis.[15]

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[14] Ibid., 82-83.

[15] African and African Diaspora art scholar, Henry Drewal has proposed the term *Sensiotics* to explain "the crucial role of the senses in the formation of material forms/arts, persons, cultures, and histories, with a focus on bodily knowledge in the creative process as well as in reception by body-minds." He contends that the growing popularity of semiotics carries a logo-centric bias that is detrimental to the study of artworks. Instead, he opts for a *Sensiotic* model that puts the senses at the center of how we understand art. I find this thesis on how the senses are constitutive of visual cognition revelatory and persuasive. Yet, I do not agree that this necessarily disqualifies the study of semiotics in interpreting works of art. As a matter of fact, the

In terms of its structure, this dissertation is divided into two parts with two chapters forming each section. The first part, "Art History and Creolization," contrasts recent international exhibitions and publications with examples in the visual arts of the Caribbean through the lens of Creole studies. The second portion of the thesis, which I have titled "Creolizing Art History," proposes a semiotic interpretation of the visual arts of the Caribbean basin. For purposes of this dissertation, the Caribbean basin is defined as those countries or territories that share a shore with the Caribbean Sea and whose history has been impacted by the colonial, neo-colonial, and post-colonial presence of Europeans and Americans and the miscegenation that occurred between them and the different groups of people that converged in this region either by nature, free will, or force. Indeed, the methodology I apply and my interpretation of the Caribbean and of contemporary Caribbean art is not intended as a definite position on ways of regarding the arts of this region but as an invitation to join the polyphony of voices and languages that characterize the area. With this in mind, I have made a conscious effort to select examples from all the three major linguistic groups into which the Caribbean is often divided—Anglophone, Hispanophone, and Francophone Caribbean—in order to demonstrate that it is possible to ruminate about a history of art that brings the whole region into a single focus.

Notwithstanding the need to amplify, in every sense of the word, discussions about the arts from the Caribbean, I would like this thesis to cogitate on the idea that the lens of creolization is a particularly useful one for analyzing and understanding the arts

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logo-centrism of semiotics has been sufficiently contested by post-structuralist theorists. In post-structuralist semiotics the image is not subordinate to the word. Moreover, I cannot help but raise a word of caution that until *Sensiotics* starts analyzing the role of the senses in, say, Flemish art, it will teeter dangerously on the division of non-Western people's art as sensorial and Anglo- and Western art as rational. Henry Drewal, "*Sensiotics* or the Study of the Senses in Understandings of Material Culture, History, and the Arts" (unpublished manuscript, April 23, 2015), Word Document.

from this part of the world. Thus, it is with the first chapter that I set the tone for the rest of this dissertation. I am interested in exploring alternate ways of approaching the arts based on the ideas put forth by Glissant. In other words, I would like to continue what the Martinican writer began in his *Caribbean Discourse* (1981) and his *Poetics of Relation* (1990) with his essays on important Caribbean and Latin American artists such as Agustín Cárdenas and Roberto Matta and apply it to a reading of the arts of the recent decades. I build upon his body of work by fleshing out what I argue are the visual signifiers embedded in the concept of creolization as particularly theorized by him. By this I mean that I interpret, through formal analysis, several of the ideas that I find have a visual resonance or counterpart in contemporary art.

It is my argument that Glissantian concepts such as the "abyss" and "*opacité*" reverberate in the art from the Caribbean. For example, the metaphor of the "open boat" finds a visual analogue in a work such as Cristopher Cozier's *The Castaway* (figure 44). The one-to-one correlation or literality of the example is meant as a way of stringing together a chain of signifiers that communicate a common preoccupation with the postcolonial history of the region. I see this chain of signifiers or Caribbean icons as a visual syntax or common vocabulary that links the arts of the different countries in the region and whose division by language cluster has been one of the major impediments in even attempting an analysis of something that could be called Caribbean art. It is in this chain of iconic signs whose meaning is—to borrow Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*—always differed that I see where creolization takes its visual and aesthetic form. Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, I understand visual creolization as the configuration of diverse elements that indicates the tumultuous and traumatic encounter

between enslaved Africans, Europeans, and indigenous communities from where were born more than one Caribbean culture.

Chapter one discusses the growing interest in theories of creolization that stem not from an ultraistic consideration to really become global and egalitarian in our artistic interests but from a desire to explore the direction in which Anglo and European art is going. As a result, the Caribbean as a zone of material production becomes excised from the telling of art histories while the intellectual expropriation of the region continues to rise. As a way of providing some specificity to the Glissantian terms indiscriminately used in accounts of contemporary art, I turn my attention to a series of articles written by the Martinican author on a variety of topics related to art. The purpose of this chapter is to contrast the space given to the Caribbean in exhibitions and publications organized and presented from a mainstream perspective with Glissant's texts—not analyzed until now—that represent a veritable attempt at crafting an art history and criticism where the lessons of creolization are rehearsed as a way of providing some specificity to the arts of the Caribbean.

Taking a page from Glissant's text on art, I examine in the second chapter the visual associations of the root of the word creolization—Creole—in order to unpack the simplified meanings often linked to this term. As previously seen, attempts at defining and understanding how the cultural phenomenon of creolization commences, scholars more often than not resort to the etymology of the word Creole and to explanations of who a Creole person is. The definitions proposed are acutely visual, in my opinion. Take for instance these two examples:

> In its main accepted usage, the noun *Creole* refers to a member of a European settler society, European in race or blood, but born in a colony. A Creole is

> therefore by nature of origin distinguished both from someone born in Europe and from the indigenous inhabitants of a colonized society.[16]

And,

> For the Creole culture of Haiti and Martinique is not that of the descendant of European settlers, as in the Spanish American territories, but rather the culture of the Creole-speaking majority, largely of African descent. The seed of this distinction may be seen in the early dual application of "Creole" to both Black and Whites, native-born.[17]

The emphasis placed on race and ethnicity, as the defining elements that fix how we subsequently understand the cultural process of creolization, seem too rigid and constrictive. My argument here is that while so much of what Creole means is defined by race, skin color and other visual markers imprinted on the body are imprecise and reductionist. Nevertheless, I am interested in exploring how these racial markers translate to the visual arts and how contemporary artists take a cue from the language of portraiture to depict signs or indicators of creolization that go deeper than the shallow reading of skin complexion in Caribbean subjects. Taking examples from three of the different language clusters found in the Caribbean, I analyze how contemporary Caribbean artists use the body as a vehicle to question the ways in which race is often narrowly read in art and how the presence of other signifiers of subject positioning help paint a more nuanced picture.

As previously mentioned, in the second section of the dissertation I delve into an analysis of the symbols or paradigmatic signs that recur across the arts from the Caribbean. I propose that a semiotics of creolization or Creole semiotics is one way to

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[16] Pheng Cheah, "Crises of Money," in *The Creolization of Theory* eds. Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), 83.

[17] Carolyn Allen, "Creole: The Problem of Definition," in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture* eds. Verene A. Shepherd and Glen L. Richards (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002), 54.

understand common concerns and preoccupations that stem from a shared history of colonization and that reverberate throughout the region. Moreover, if we take these symbols as the most elemental parts of language then it is possible to talk about a Caribbean visual vocabulary that is always fluid and never complete.

As a way of laying out the groundwork for the concept of Creole semiotics, I begin chapter three by revising the principal tenets of the study of iconography and semiotics. By providing some background information about art history's thorny relationship with semiotics' approach at analyzing the structure of both visual and verbal language, I attempt to establish the somewhat murky and charged territory where I want my study to be set. The overarching argument that I want to propose is that Creole semiotics is an extension of poststructuralist semiotics whereby the construction of meaning in Caribbean artworks parallels the dynamism that characterizes the core structure of Creole languages and culture. The analysis of recurrent tropes in art—what I call *icons*—through the lens of Creole semiotics uncovers a process of signification that, not unlike creolization, is fluid and continuous, never reaching completeness.

In the last and fourth chapter, I focus my attention on what I consider to be the ultimate signifier in Caribbean art: the sea. An analysis of the signifying practice of the Caribbean Sea in artworks in and of the Caribbean provides an opportunity to adopt the viewpoint of the sea and, with that subtle yet radical change in perspective, ask what the relationship is between artists and this body of water and what it exposes about the region as a whole. The semiotics of the sea analyzed in this chapter gives visibility to a conflicted relationship marked by allure and also by trauma. Characterized by an

"aesthetics of rupture and connection," the Caribbean Sea is the setting that enables points of contact but also of separation with the larger discourse of contemporary art.[18]

The key topics I have attempted to explore in this dissertation can be asserted in the following question: How can the concepts and analytic tools developed by Glissant, particularly in his *Caribbean Discourse* (1981) and *Poetics of Relation* (1990), open a way of not only illustrating Caribbean art's contribution to creolization but also of counteracting the tendency to expropriate creolization and other related concepts as an abstracted metaphor for globalization? In light of its conceptual applicability to other regions, the Caribbean as metaphor becomes the modus operandi of many a scholarly pursuit at the same time that specific studies about the region continue to be neglected, at least when it comes to its art. I am hopeful that I have imbued the words in this introduction with a tone of critical urgency. My analysis of artworks from the Pan-Caribbean region—including works by artists from the Anglophone area (Christopher Cozier, Joscelyn Gardner, Janine Antoni, and Tavares Strachan), the Francophone region (Jean-Ulrick Désert, Hervé Beuze, and Rigaud Benoit), and the Spanish-speaking islands (Miguel Luciano, Regina José Galindo, Quisqueya Henríquez, Felix González-Torres, and Álvaro Barrios)—is an effort to activate the process of interpreting them through the prism of creolization. Before the world becomes Caribbean in its urban archipelagos, as James Clifford once brazenly pronounced, may studies such as this one and the artworks herein analyzed be the ones to help turn the tide.

[18] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 151.

Chapter One

Theorizing Practice, Practicing Theory: Édouard Glissant and the Study of the Visual Arts

> The people of the Antilles had retained not only the memory of the word, they bore within the lightning flash of the brush-stroke, the ochreous eminence of so many landscapes recombined.
> -Édouard Glissant

In "The Visual Arts and Créolité" Pierre E. Bocquet, a curator and promoter of Creole culture, asks: "Can the term 'Creole' be abstracted from its primary, anthropological significance—as is already done when it is applied to literature written in the French-based Creole tongue—and applied to painting, sculpture and the visual arts in general?"[19] Bocquet admits this is a step that has not been taken before, and goes on to affirms that the existence of "a Creole perception of the color scale which might serve as the basis of a Creole aesthetic" can be observed in the works of Antillean artists.[20] Bocquet finds evidence of such claim in the fact that artworks from diverse Caribbean origins uniformly display features he considers to be entirely absent from paintings derived from other cultures.

While I share Bocquet's thoughts about the relevance and applicability of the term Creole to the visual arts—an idea which in my esteem, has not been looked at carefully by art historians—I find that his proposed methodology for studying the "perception of the color scale" is steeped in a geographic and environmental determinism that fails to reflect on the historical and cultural complexities that make up the term Creole. Even if

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[19] Pierre E. Bocquet, "The Visual Arts and Créolité," in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: The Institute of International Visual Arts, 1996), 117.

[20] Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoisseau, and Raphael Confiant, *Eloge de la créolité* (Paris: Gallimard/Presses Universitaires Créoles, 1989), 26, quoted in Bocquet, "The Visual Arts and Créolité," 117.

we believed that no other culture handles color the same way as Caribbean artists do—a preposterous and highly subjective argument—what does color have to do with the conditions that brought the different cultures that converge in the Caribbean and other sites where cultural and linguistic creolization took place? As a phenomenon that is neither entirely European, African, nor Amerindian, creolization in Caribbean art cannot be understood by applying solely the model of the formal analysis whose study of such elements as color is so deeply rooted in the Western tradition of art history. On the contrary, for the sake of producing new and original thinking in the field of Caribbean art, it is necessary that young scholars come up with different models, a new paradigm made up of not just external sources but one that taps into the current theories coming out of the Caribbean.

For the past three decades, scholarship on art has taken note of a different kind of art historical discourse, one that is more inclusive of other cultures without minimizing them to one common and homogenous experience. Central to this relatively new turn is the work of Martinican-born author Édouard Glissant. His ideas about creolization, *opacité*, *relation* and *mondialité*, among others, have become part of the "toolbox" of art historians, curators, and interlopers from other disciplines who have applied postcolonial interpretations to the history of art. Books about global or international art history have been published with Glissant's concepts acting as theoretical anchors without explicitly drawing on the direct relation between these concepts and examples in the visual art. There are, however, scholars who have pondered about the specific suitability of Glissant's ideas to the study and analysis of art history. How have intellectual thinkers discussed the direct connection between theories of creolization and the visual arts, is one

of the questions set out to be answered in the first part of this chapter. In the second part I analyze the up-to-now unexplored documents written by Glissant about art, which throw light on the ways this Caribbean author rehearsed his ideas through the study of the visual arts. Together, these two inquiries will provide a more informed notion of the ways in which Glissant's creolization performs a multifaceted role in the field of art history.

1.1 Édouard Glissant in Art History

In the essay "A Conversation with Édouard Glissant aboard the Queen Mary II," Malian art historian, Manthia Diawara, asks the question that prompts the first part of this chapter. Aboard a luxurious ocean liner journeying from Southampton to New York—a metaphor not ignored by the interlocutors—Diawara asks Glissant "why is it that nowadays architects, museum curators, and young musicians are so interested in [your] work?"[21] To this Glissant responds: "It's because reality has caught up with and imposed what I've been saying for twenty or thirty years now amidst general incomprehension."[22] What the Caribbean author was referring to was his concept of *opacité*, a right everyone has against a positivist quest for absolute truth and transparency. Even Glissant's reply to the question is deliberately opaque in the sense that it refuses to conform to a direct, fully graspable, and understandable answer. In the context of art, even if Glissant does not explicitly say so, artists, art historians, and curators have devised ways of making a kind of artistic production that does not reduce the complexities of identity to an object of

[21] Tanya Barson, Peter Gorschlüter, and Petrine Archer Straw, *Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2010), 62.

[22] Ibid.

knowledge.[23] Opacity rejects relationships based on the seemingly absolute knowledge and comprehension between peoples. It shifts the tone from interconnectedness between cultures based on analogies to a resolute determination to accept, especially between unequal power relations, that which is incomprehensible. Based on this, Glissant's ideas proved to be particularly useful to studies of Afro-Atlantic culture and arts such as the 2010 exhibition and catalogue *Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic*. Rather than presenting an alternate response to modern art, a comparison between the art of Europe and that of Africa and its Diaspora or, much less, a counterpoint to modern art, *Afro-Modern* establishes nexus across time and space and focuses on the gaps that history has overlooked.

The problem, however, is that while *Afro-Modern* does present Glissant's position in favor of an archipelagic sense of the world where opacity rules there is no real interpretation of how his ideas fit in the study of the visual arts.[24] To be quite clear, the notion that Glissant opposes and that is not broached in the catalogue to the fullest extent is Paul Gilroy's juggernaut concept of the Black Atlantic. For Glissant, the Black Atlantic, which is Gilroy's heuristic way of explaining modernity as a phenomenon that occurred when black lives and cultures where forcibly transported from African to the New World and then to Europe, is an idea of continental proportions and thus concerned with unity. Glissant's archipelagic thinking is, on the other hand, about fragmentation and multiplicity: "I believe the arrival of the Africans within the phenomenon of slavery is

[23] Celia M. Britton, *Édouard Glissant and postcolonial theory: strategies of language and resistance* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia), 19.

[24] To be fair, the exhibition and book sought to analyze the implications of Gilroy's Black Atlantic for the study of art; a project not unlike mine, where I set forth to investigate Glissant's theories, mainly his concept of creolization, for the study of Caribbean art.

not about the Atlantic, but the Caribbean.… So I'm not an Atlanticist, nor am I continental. I think that the 'archipelagisation' of the deportation of the Africans is a reality, a precious one."[25]

Along similar lines, *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, a publication of the New Museum of Contemporary Art from 2007, included Glissant's "For Opacity," a section of his *Poetics of Relation*.[26] With the inclusion of Glissant's and other theorists' essays, the New Museum sought to explore the shifts in the "epistemological ground of contemporary artistic discourses based not in difference but *from* difference."[27] This was the impetus behind *Over Here*; however, as Jean Fisher and Gerardo Mosquera—the authors of the introduction—admitted more than a decade and a half after the publication of *Out There*, the precursor of *Over Here*, there had been "little impact in the institutional structures of power that manipulate financial, intellectual, and aesthetic decision."[28] I cannot help apply the paradox of "the little institutional change despite the discursive shift" to the context of Caribbean art. For despite all the instances in which Glissant is invoked in scholarly publications on art, his theories are seldom applied to the geographic context from where he is writing, nor has the impact of such books been of consequence to the history of Caribbean art.

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[25] Tanya Barson, Peter Gorschlüter, and Petrine Archer Straw, *Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2010), 60.

[26] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of relation,* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1997), 189-194.

[27] Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fischer, introduction to *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 3.

[28] Ibid, 2.

Even if the editors of *Over Here* purport to present writings "*from* difference," the use of Glissant's theory in a book about internationalized perspectives on art (as the title and introduction suggest) re-inscribes the absence of Caribbean art in art historical discourses.[29] As Erica Moiah James has argued in her doctoral dissertation, when put to the service of the universality of art (also, internationalized and globalized), the local and the particular is often erased.[30] One must not forget that for all the claims to an international outlook on art, *Over Here*'s orchestrating voice is securely positioned within the mainstream. Sociologist Mimi Sheller reminds us that it is not uncommon to see metropolitan global theory pirating peripheral theory for the reproduction of its own discourses of power.[31] "For Opacity" is an attractive piece of critical writing that offers as an argument the irreducibility of "the other." This leads to envisioning endless possibilities of artistic relations based, not on a search for unity, but on difference, thus conceiving a future of internationalized connections. The problem with this is that by essentializing Glissant's ideas to a condition of the contemporary global art world what happens is that the theory becomes detached from the historical context that was bound to it. This has grave implications for the Caribbean and its arts; not only has there been an elision of the Caribbean in the historiography of modern art but now, when supposedly there has been a shift in discourse, the Caribbean is abstracted to the category of theory, nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

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[29] Erica Moiah James, "Re-Worlding the World: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2008), 2. ProQuest (UMI 3383513).

[30] Ibid, 10-11.

[31] Mimi Sheller, "Creolization in Discourses of Global Culture," in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. Sara Ahmed (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 278.

However, despite stripping off the regional specificity in Glissant's idea for the purpose of theorizing an ever-expanding international art scene, there has been a group of scholars interested in positioning key concepts such as creolité and creolization in the Caribbean context and analyzing, not assuming, their relevance to the visual arts.

1.2 Moving Beyond Quotational Theory

In the "Biennial Manifesto," literally an ABC of what German curator Hans Ulrich Obrist considers to be the most essential concepts in the implementation of contemporary biennials, he ascribes the letter 'A' to the word 'Archipelago' and explains: "For the literary critic Édouard Glissant, biennials can either be like continents (rock solid and imposing) or like archipelagos (welcoming and sheltering)."[32] An archipelagic effect, similar to the one described by Glissant, was achieved between 2001 and 2002 when the presentation of *Documenta XI* was divvyed up into five sites across four continents. Called platforms, these stages were, all except one, discursive spaces where instead of artworks it was ideas and discussions that were showcased.[33] Under the directorship of Okwui Enwezor and five international co-curators, *Documenta XI* put forth an exhibition that tried "to make sense of the rapid changes and transformations that elicit new, inventive modes of transdisciplinary action within the contemporary global

[32] Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Biennial Manifesto," *Flash Art,* October 2009, 42.

[33] The first platform titled "Democracy Unrealized" started out in Vienna, Austria in March, 2001 and continued in Berlin; the second "Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation" took place in New Delhi on May 7, 2001; the third one and part of the topic of this chapter was "Créolité and Creolization" and it was organized in St. Lucia in January, 2012; "Under Siege: Four African Cities—Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, and Lagos" was the fourth platform, which took place in Lagos, Nigeria in March, 2002; and finally, on June 8, 2002, the exhibition proper and fifth platform opened in Kassel, Germany.

public sphere."[34] The exhibition, which was equally praised and criticized,[35] succeeded in presenting a multifarious group of artists and scholars in loci other than the great European and American capitals of the art world. One of its most vocal critics, Anthony Downey, proposes, however, that *Documenta XI* was able to avoid one of the pitfalls that comes with announcing multiculturalism from the ivory towers of art by "suggesting that art as a practice should be contextualized within the terms of its potential to produce knowledge systems that further articulate interdisciplinary models for the discussion of the effect of globalization, its relationship to postcoloniality, and the production of new modes of subjectivity within these axes."[36] Inspired by this assertion, I argue that the third platform—Créolité and Creolization—was a laboratory that, by its polyvocal nature, performed the very terms it was seeking to understand. As the setting for this third platform, the Caribbean island of St. Lucia was chosen as the stage from where creolization, and all the disciplines that intersect through it, was complexly thought as a paradigm for the study of culture.

From the onset of the three-day workshop held January 13-15, 2002, the scholars and artists who comprised the roundtable of invited intellectuals sought to answer a series of inquiries around the vexing issue of Creole arts and cultures. I quote in length the questions that served as starting points to the workshop and whose answers constitute the tome that was subsequently published in 2003 because I think these are useful points of

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[34] Okwui Enwezor, *Documenta 11_Platform 5: The Exhibition* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 40.

[35] For some examples, see: Anthony Downey, "The Spectacular Difference of *Documenta XI*," *Third Text* 17, no. I (2003): 85-92; Ressa Greenberg, "Identity Exhibitions: From Magiciens de la terre to Documenta II," *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (Spring, 2005): 90-94; and, Sylvester Okwunodo Ogbechie, "Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze," *Art Journal* 64, no. 1 (2005): 80-89.

[36] Downey, "The Spectacular Difference of *Documenta XI*" *Third Text*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2003): 89.

departure for my main question of how theories of creolization get translated into the visual arts. In their introduction, the authors asked[37]:

> But one of the most contentious issues surrounding *créolité* today is its relationship to French. Can the concept then be applied to describe each process of cultural mixing, or is it peculiar to the French Caribbean? Does it constitute a genuine alternative to the entrenched paradigms that have dominated the study of postcolonial and postimperial identities? What are the differences between creolization and Creoleness? Is Creoleness a useful notion for the reading of cultural discourse? What are the relations between Creoleness and hybridity, Creoleness and miscegenation, Creoleness and cosmopolitanism? Can [Bernabé, Chamoisseau, and Confiant's] "ethics of vigilance" that emerges out of Creoleness be transformed into a political philosophy of the Other? . . . How and where are the texts of Creoleness written and played out in the everyday? . . . Is every postmodern city a site of creolization? . . . Until now there has been no comprehensive catalogue of Creole arts and culture. What would be its criteria? How would it be organized? By region? By theme? By period? How are the new typographies inscribed in language? How are the processes of Creoleness and creolization expressed in literature and other linguistic practices? If Creoleness and creolization seek to express the multiplicity, the polycentricity, and the diversity of cultural encounters that are never fixed but constantly reworked and reconfigured, how have writers and linguists met the challenges? How are Creoleness and creolization translated into cultural productions? What constitutes a creolized "translation"?[38]

The guests invited to present papers and/or be part of the open sessions included scholars such as Stuart Hall, Françoise Vergés, Gerardo Mosquera, Isaac Julien, and Robert Chaudenson among many others. Of this group, the two most vocal participants were Hall and Chaudenson who were at the center of the discussion regarding the applicability of terms such as Creole, créolité, and creolization to fields outside linguistics. Chaudenson, one of the most prominent scholars of French Creole language, was emphatic about maintaining the rigorous system of classification that he has applied to his studies on Creole linguistics, particularly when it comes to the case of the Creole-

[37] Along with Enwezor, the other authors are co-curators were: Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya.

[38] Okwui Enwezor et al, *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11 Platform 3* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 13-16.

speaking countries in the Indian Ocean. In particular, Chaudenson strongly held to his belief that language, specifically spoken modes of expression, is what determines Creole communities. From his first-hand research he was also adamant about the need to deemphasize the African presence as a necessary element in the cultural exchange that creolization represents. Citing different case studies, his views about creolization stood out for their ethnographic character, which collided at the discursive level with most of the other invited intellectuals. Without anyone explicitly saying it, there was a division between those who thought of these concepts in metonymic terms, which thus allowed them to extrapolate their use to settings such as the Spanglish spoken in New York by Puerto Ricans,[39] for example, and the fewer ones who, like Chaudenson, were emphatic in showing constraint: "I am in favor of showing a certain modesty, or moderation in the use of the word 'Creole,' because when we begin to apply it everywhere we end up emptying this terms of its content."[40] However, despite the tension between the linguists and the culturalists, they all expressed apprehension toward the infinite expansion of the term and its programmatic use as a description of the globalized world.

The restraint against the universal use of the terms Creole, créolité, and creolization led a few of these scholars, especially those whose research was based outside the Caribbean (i.e., the Indian Ocean or Central America[41]), to suggest that

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[39] Gerardo Mosquera and Juan Flores, "[1st] Open Session," in *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11 Platform 3*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 48-56.

[40] Robert Chaudenson, "[4th] Open Session," in *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11 Platform 3*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 256.

[41] Chaudenson and other Southeast Asian scholars such as Ginette Ramassamy, Jean Claude Carpenin Marimoutou, and Françoise Vergés focused on the socio-educational and linguistic aspects of creolization on the islands of the Indian Ocean, mainly Réunion. Virginia Pérez-Ratton was the sole scholar representing Central America.

creolization is not always the correct theory to explain cross-cultural exchanges. For instance, Chaudenson sees creolization as a "phenomenon" and succinctly declared: "creolization is not the rule but the exception" in reference to the scarcity of Spanish Creole languages.[42] Similarly, Françoise Vergés opined that not all contacts between cultures and languages lead to creolization, and the late Costa Rican curator, Virginia Pérez-Ratton, provided a case in point by saying that creolization is not a model that can be used to explain the ways Central Americans articulate cultural processes. To a certain extent, the negation of creolization as a synonym for the contact between cultures brought to the roundtable a healthy dose of skepticism. Furthermore, prompted by the need to establish parameters of what constitutes a Creole experience, the panelists, and much of their discussions, were consumed with the task of providing definitions to the terms that headed the platform: créolité and creolization. Despite the fact that a lot of emphasis was put into refining and agreeing on a definition of these concepts, Stuart Hall was one of the leading voices in establishing that créolité was a literary program arising from Martinique and based on a reading on or a reflection of the process of creolization.[43] Likewise, it was Hall who offered a working definition of creolization that met the pluralistic dimensions represented in the papers and open discussions held in *Documenta XI*: "Creolization…refers to the process of 'cultural and linguistic mixing' which arise from the entanglement of different cultures in the same indigenous space or location,

[42] "Gerardo Mosquera spoke of the historic reasons behind the absence of Spanish Creoles. This is a question that has interested and intrigued me for a long time, since in the end and to my knowledge, there are only two Spanish Creoles in the world, the Palanquero [sic, Palenquero, a Creole language spoken on the Caribbean coast of Colombia] and the Chabacano [a Creole language spoken in the Philippines]. Why is it that the Spanish did not become creolized even though it appears that their history was about the same?" Robert Chaudenson, "[1st] Open Session," 50.

[43] Stuart Hall, "Créolité and the Process of Creolization," in *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11 Platform 3*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 35.

primarily in the context of slavery, colonization, and the plantation societies characteristic of the Caribbean and parts of Spanish America and Southeast Asia."[44] However, as Françoise Vergés reminded us, historic specificity does not preclude acknowledgement that polysemy is a quality associated with creolization and thus it is impossible to group the diversity of the Creole experience under a totalizing sign.[45] Vergés, whose area of research are the islands of the Indian Ocean, recognizes that Creole societies have a common matrix in common—slavery and colonization—that has given way to cultures based on heterogeneity and unpredictability as opposed to being determined by insularity and dependency. The positions just explained here help to give a sense of the types of discussion that Platform 3 of *Documenta XI* enabled. Despite the tacit omission of Édouard Glissant in this conference, the panelists were able to reflect, through diverse arguments that cut across different time spans and disciplinary fields, on the possibilities of the study of Creole cultures, the literary program of créolité, and the multifaceted process of creolization.

Contrast the setting and the activities that took place in Créolité and Creolization with those of another biennial held just three years earlier. The *6th Caribbean Biennial* was an exhibition organized by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan and curator Jens Hoffman on the island of St. Kitts in 1999. The purpose of the *6th Caribbean Biennial* was to invite a group of the twelve most famous artists from the 1990s, which included Olafur Eliasson, Mariko Mori, Chris Ofili, Pipilotti Rist, and Rikrit Tiravanija, among others, to spend a week together with all expenses paid on this Caribbean island. However, despite

[44] Ibid., 30

[45] François Vergés, "Kiltir Kreol: Processes and Practices in Créolité and Creolization," in *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11 Platform 3*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 179-180.

the ad campaigns announcing the biennial in art magazines such as *Artforum* and *Frieze*, there were no objects, performances, installations, actions, or conceptual works displayed during the week of November 10-17 except, perhaps, the actual logistics and infrastructure needed to put together the announcing of the exhibition and gathering of the artists. With this biennial, the curators wanted to reflect on the "stratified reality" and the expectations of art shows that summon the attention of the international art world.[46]

The venue, St. Kitts, was chosen as a site whose unencumbered art scene indexed the absence of art in this biennial. Consider the following statement from the art book/exhibition catalogue: "That's why this *Caribbean Biennial* is about generosity, too. It sheds new light on the Island of St. Kitts, and imposes it on the maps of contemporary art. It is a declaration of indignation, retaliation, and endless anger. For just one week it felt like all roads led to St. Kitts. In any event, the borders between art and the Caribbean have blurred, and that's good."[47] The colonizing behavior embedded in these words, which ignores the fact that for decades the Caribbean has been the site for exhibitions that

[46] An interesting comparison to this work is Felix González-Torres's performance *The Beach is Nice* carried out in complete anonymity in 1983 in Santurce, Puerto Rico. The photograph and its accompanying text is an acerbic commentary about tourism as a form of performance art. The difference between González-Torres's photo-documentary work and Cattelan's *6th Caribbean Biennial* lies in the tone. While the former adopts a sarcastic tone about the stereotypical view that islands are shallow spaces emptied of memory and meaning and thus incapable of producing art (only capable of receiving it), Cattelan believes it. "For thirteen consecutive days I played my favorite role: the tourist (an example of metaphorical escape). The piece was performed right into the "real" world, and in complete anonymity. No press release, no specific props, actions, or text. Only trivia. A newspaper, *Artforum*, a bottle of Hawaiian Tropic suntan oil #3, a black bathing suit, and a few Piña Coladas. I simply laid under the sun for the duration of the performance. One more the performance never happened, it was forgotten. In the island, memory is prohibited. Greetings!" In *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 59-60.

[47] Coincidentally, as with Hans Ulrich Obrist's "Biennial Manifesto," this exhibition catalogue was also structured as the ABCs of the *6th Caribbean Biennial* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2001), n.p. Although it falls outside the scope of this project, it would be interesting to analyze the backward and narrow approach assumed in discourses of contemporary art, which impose an encyclopedic reading of biennials. Most alarming about this method, especially when we look at the *6th Caribbean Biennial* catalogue, is that terms such as colonization, slavery, and plantation are nowhere to be found.

continuously blur the "border between art and the Caribbean" such as the Trienal Poli/Gráfica de San Juan (Puerto Rico), the Bienal Nacional de Artes Visuales de Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), and the Havana Biennial (Cuba), reveals the patronizing attitude that assumes that art and the Caribbean are two mutually exclusive signifiers in need of a redeeming and remedying curatorial hand that can marry both in a blissful spectacle in paradise.[48]

The role of the Caribbean in the context of the international art scene comes to the fore if we compare this biennial with the third platform of *Documenta XI* whose purpose was to enact a thinking tank on the island of St. Lucia. As opposed to St. Lucia, St. Kitts was the means to an end; the curators wanted to highlight the long list of biennials proliferating all over the world and used St. Kitts as a metaphor for the superfluousness of exhibitions, which meant everything and anything except the act of making or showing art. The ads announcing the biennial and the photographs published in the exhibition catalogue conspicuously avoided anything that could be deemed as art and instead were more reminiscent of travelogues and postcards that conjured up the cliché of the Caribbean as playground. Once the artists had arrived, judging from the photographic essays in the catalogue, the goal was to cavort and frolic by the beach and the pool—hurricanes notwithstanding.[49]

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[48] For a more in-depth critical reading of the *6th Caribbean Biennial* see Erica Moiah James, "Re-Worlding the World: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2008), 6-12. ProQuest (UMI 3383513). In her dissertation, James argues that the postcolonial and post-modern attitude behind Catellan's and Hoffmann's biennial does a disservice for Caribbean art and for the region because it imposes a de-historicizing cynicism that ironically reinstates the mechanism of power relations thought to be dismantled in the first place.

[49] While the *6th Caribbean Biennial* was underway, hurricane Lenny struck the island of St. Kitts on November 16, 1999.

St. Lucia, on the other hand, could be said to represent the opposite of St. Kitts, if by opposite we understand, not the act of displaying art, but the act of thinking with and through the ideas that inform art made from the Caribbean and/or other archipelagic formations marked by the violence of slavery and colonization. It has been well established so far that, for the purposes of the *6th Caribbean Biennial*, the role played by St. Kitts could have been substituted for any other tropical island in the Caribbean. After all, the five other nonexistent antecedents to the 6th edition of this biennial could be thought to have taken place in "random" places such as the fancy beaches of Haiti, Aruba, or Trinidad and Tobago. But, could the third platform of *Documenta XI*—Créolité and Creolization—have happened in another place other than St. Lucia? The answer is yes and no. From the proceedings of the conference we learn that translation into St. Lucian Kwéyòl was not offered to the audience (assuming it was opened to the public at large), while English was the obligatory lingua franca, via simultaneous translation, of the papers read and the discussions carried out.[50] Besides the three days organized around the roundtable, there is no testimony that other activities planned with the intention of enriching the discussion took place. However, not unlike St. Kitts—the setting of the *6th Caribbean Biennial*—we must see St. Lucia too as a sign of unsettlement in the context of contemporary global arts. While both are signifiers of biennials organized around the turn of the twenty-first century and by European-based organizations and curators, as critical disruptions of the Euro- and Anglo-perspective on global arts they each signify something very different. As opposed to the passive role played out by the cultural agents in St. Kitts, during the three-day symposium in St. Lucia, the unpredictability of what

[50] Derek Walcott, "[1st] Open Session," in *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11 Platform 3*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 59.

was going to be the result of such a diverse meeting yielded at the end a fruitful discussion ripe with original thinking on the theme of creolization.

In Okwui Enwezor's and the associate curators' opening remarks of Créolité and Creolization, the authors give credit to the originators of the literary program of créolité, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé, whose *Éloge de la Créolité* sought to create an "ethics of vigilance," "a sort of mental envelope in the middle of which our world will be built in full consciousness of the outer world."[51] Translated to a geographic referent, the authors of *Éloge* were fully aware that the Creole world they wanted to build for literature was going to be projected from Martinique and the Antilles. This is not so different from the role performed by St. Lucia in *Documenta XI* where the purpose was to organize a thinking process from a locality that signified the shared history of colonialism and the confluence of diverse intellectual thought.

1.3 Staging a "Creole Factory"

Thus far I have provided an analysis of the different levels of specificity and depth curators have given to Édouard Glissant's theories and concepts, particularly that of creolization, and, in turn, how creolization has been unpacked as a theoretical framework that can help the understanding of the role the Caribbean and Caribbean artists play in the arts. *Documenta XI*, specifically, was the first major exhibition to consider the relevance of Creole cultures and their art in the discourse of contemporary art. Six years later, in 2009, the idea of exploring the artistic production of Creole

[51] Jean Bernabé et al, *Eloge de la créolité*, 13, quoted in *Créolité and Creolization*, 3.

cultures was taken a step further when Yolande Bacot curated *Kréyol Factory* at Parc de la Villete in Paris, France.[52]

The exhibition, whose catalogue opens and closes by stating Stuart Hall's work as the principal inspiration behind the art show, brought artists from the US, the Spanish, English, French and Dutch Caribbean, as well as the Indian Ocean (Reunion and Mauritius), in an effort to showcase a multi-varied and multi-media experience. However, this variegated bunch, as signaled by the exhibition title *Kréyol Factory*, produces what Maryse Condé has called in her opening essay titled "Le monde est une gigantesque Créole Factory," "des produits culturels créoles."[53] In her essay, Condé misses the opportunity to examine the implications of a historical materialism that lies beneath the appellation and interpretation of artworks as products of cultural labor. In an exhibition such as this one, the specter of colonialism is the tie that binds both archipelagos, which share similar cultures that are a composite and that have given way to unique linguistic and/or artistic expressions. In other words, it is not made clear in the opening remarks how past forms of (systematic enforcement of) labor in places as the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean, historically known as slavery, can now see in the image of the factory a machine that produces "Creole cultural products." Same as the plantation, at a factory the people who occupy the role of laborers inherently lack agency. In other words, as the site of production of manufacturing goods, the factory implies a structure of modernization not unlike the plantation system and with an equally problematic dialectical relationship between master and slave, foreman and laborer.

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[52] The exhibition was held from April 7 to July 5, 2009 at Parc de la Villete, Paris, France.

[53] Maryse Condé, "Le monde est une gigantesque Créole Factory," in *Kréyol Factory: Des artistes interrogent les identités créoles*, ed. Yolande Bacot (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 14.

A Créole factory, however, could also point to the active production of artistic goods—of a healthy and steady machine that continuously produces Creole art. Out of the production of all these goods and from the meeting of diverse Creole experiences, it is inevitable that similarities and common themes will emerge. Not unlike this thesis, the exhibition *Kréyol Factory* sought to hone in on a series of seven topics that synthesize a handful of recurrent aspects across the Creole world. Titled "Traversées," "Le trouble des genres," "L'Afrique 'commaunaté imaginée'," "Noir comment?," "Des îles sous influences," "Les Nouveaux mondes," and "Chez soi – de loin" these seven topics or "sequence," as Condé calls them, follows the same order as in the exhibition catalogue. To be sure, these seven sections point to ideas about slave trade, race, gender, colonization, insularity, and diaspora; however, because the exhibition lacks a proper definition and delineation of what it means by "Kréyol" and what the parameters of the show are, the relationship between the different segments and with Creoleness is lost.

Furthermore, besides the clever combination of languages—Creole and English—for the title of a French exhibition, a syntactic mix-match that could be seen as being on the liberal end of the Creole studies spectrum, there is not a whole lot of reference to the trajectory that now allows us to consider Puerto Rican and Dominican artists under the umbrella of "Kréyol" art. In other words, in an exhibition that emphasizes the participation of artists from the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, the two most paradigmatic regions where linguistic creolization has occurred, why include countries from the Spanish Caribbean and exclude others with strong artistic backgrounds such as Cuba? And despite the few peppered quotes from Patrick Chamoisseau and Raphael Confiant, two of the authors behind the seminal book *Eloge de la créolité*, there is no real

mention of how this manifesto (where the writers declare their debt to Aimée Cesaire and Édouard Glissant) paved the way for the study of Creole identity in the Caribbean. If the subtitle of the exhibition is *Des artistes interrogent les identités créoles*, should not there be an explanation of what are or why Creole identities need to be questioned? Based on the curatorial decisions one can ascertain from *Kréyol Factory*'s exhibition catalogue and other materials, it is difficult to gather a sense of what Creole art is, but more importantly, of what Creole art is not.

A sub-theme of "Les Nouveaux mondes," the sixth chapter or segment of the exhibition, is titled "Creolizations." In this section, as with the rest of the exhibition catalogue, quotes and passages from other books are paired with photographs of the artworks. However, besides Condé's general introduction, there is not a fledged out overview of what each section means and how it works together with the other parts of this factory. Nevertheless, the quotes and passages help to situate the artwork and encourage the reader to make connections not only between the text and the image but also across other sections of the exhibition. For instance, the works that feature in "Creolizations" vary in terms of media and the subject matter described and could easily dialogue with other works classified under other sections. A photograph such as Thierry Fontaine's *basket, La Réunion* (figure 1) from 2006 with its reference to three sports or leisure activities—basketball from the title, soccer from the form of the balls carried by the young man in the photo, and fishing from the net made from shells—could be part of the same series as Pierrot Men's *La Réunion* (figure 2) from 2008, or it could very well had been paired with the less obvious photo by Jane Evelyn Atwood, *Haiti* (figure 3), from 2005-2007—the former from the section titled "Des îles sous influences" and the

latter from "Noir comment?" A comparison between Fontaine's *basket* and Atwood's *Haiti*, for example, reminds the viewer of the economic side of the sea. That is, the cargo or freight boat seen in *Haiti*, whose carcasses are reminiscent of the violence brought by the transatlantic slave trade, signals as well the exchange of goods and monetary transactions in which shells, like the ones in Fontaine's *basket*, *La Réunion*, were used at one point as a type of currency. In contrast, it is difficult to pass unnoticed the irony that while in *Haiti* there are dispersed fish that could actually benefit from being carried in a net, in Fontaine's photograph, the net serves a different and more lighthearted purpose. Despite the fact that this was not a pairing thought by the curator of *Kréyol Factory*, it is still possible to make the uncomfortable connection between the sense of scarcity, both material and moral, that we see in *Haiti* and the abundance represented by the three balls on way to an ostensible fun match of soccer.

Categorized under "Creolizations," an untitled quote and a mixed media sculpture titled *Assemblage-Maison: les enfants s'en vont* (figure 4) from 2008, both by Martinique-based artist Sentier, examines the sinister side of houses or edifices meant for sheltering and protection. Sentier's description of houses as mausoleums that evoke "massacres committed in silence" and his equaling disturbing and grotesque rendition of a collage-like house, while not referencing directly the different building types that emerged during the plantation system, does bring to mind the Big House (manor of the masters) or the slave quarters. Even when lacking a proper explanation of how this work fits into the topic of creolization, the viewer may be able to recall that houses were a popular symbol and part of the costumes used during the Jonkonnu Masquerade in the nineteenth century in Jamaica. Isaac Mendes Belisario immortalized the costume of

"Jaw-Bone or House John-Canoe" (figure 5) in *Sketches of Character*, published in 1837. Accompanied by a band of musicians, this particular costume represented a houseboat or a colonial house—an innocuous symbol for white colonial onlookers—that referred to "the sheltering role of the spirit by serving as a protective enclosure," a use that has found its origins in ceremonies in Central Africa.[54] However, due to the absence of an appropriate text explaining why Sentier's quote and his *Assemblage-Maison* were selected for this sub-section, it remains unclear how the concept of creolization can be translated to the visual field or how this is an interrogation of Creole identities.

In the same "Creolizations" section are three works by Trinidadian artist Wendy Nanan titled *The Huddle* (figure 6, 2004), *The Midwicket Bounce* (figure 7, 2003), and *Field of Play 1* (figure 8, 2006) that depict three moments in a game of cricket. The accompanying text is an apropos passage from V.S. Naipaul's *La Traversée du milieu* where the narrator declares that in the Antilles cricket represents a paradox. At once the symbol of a tradition brought by English settlers to the Caribbean, specifically to the West Indies, and adopted by Creole people, cricket also symbolizes, according to Naipul, the inability to see beyond the prowess of an individual player and play together as a team.[55] Those familiar with Richard D. E. Burton's *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* will know well the biography of cricket in the Caribbean where it started as a very exclusive game played by white merchants and by the end of the nineteenth century it had already "descended" to the hands of the black populations of the

[54] Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martínez-Ruiz, *Art & Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (New Haven & London: Yale Center for British Art, 2007), 47.

[55] V.S. Naipul, *La Traversée de milieu* (Paris: Plon, 1994). Quoted in Yolande Bacot, ed., *Kréyol Factory: Des artistes interrogent les identités créoles* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 139.

West Indies.[56] Burton indicates that towards the end of the nineteenth century two strands of popular cricket emerged on the streets and beaches of the West Indie: "Tip and Run Firms" and "marble cricket."[57] As with the icon of the house, cricket is an example of a symbol that has been re-appropriated and turned into an original and highly complex signifier in the Caribbean. The problem is that, in the case of this exhibition, not providing an explanation as to why these works are considered examples of creolization or how they relate to each other begs for justification. As the firsts to tackle the issue of Creole cultures and art, the organizers of *Kréyol Factory* should have preemptively answered questions and raised arguments that would have situated the exhibition as a knowledgeable contender in the field of Creole studies.

Kréyol Factory, for all its shortcomings, introduced the idea of Creoleness as a curatorial model. It presented topics associated with, albeit not exclusively, the particular political and cultural circumstances of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. Going a step further than *Documenta XI*, the exhibition showed varied and multifarious voices of art practitioners organized according to a rubric that was not steadfastly set in stone but that allowed viewers to make connections across cultures, media, and themes. However, not unlike *Documenta XI*, the name of Édouard Glissant was conspicuously absent from the exhibition. For we have arrived at a point where the lack of dialogue between the broader fields of global arts, multiculturalism, and diasporic studies, which have utilized a decontextualized version of Glissant, and the recent curatorial incursions into Creole art has become evident. As I will discuss in the next section, Glissant's attention to the arts

[56] Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 179.

[57] Ibid.

of the Caribbean and the Americas, preserved in the documents he published and the interviews he granted, reveal a critical alertness towards creolization in the arts and in the methodology used to understand it.

1.4 Édouard Glissant, Art Historian

Édouard Glissant was a devoted writer, spectator, and, in general terms, thinker of the visual arts. He cared for the works of such artists as Wifredo Lam (Cuba), Agustín Cárdenas (Cuba), Roberto Matta (Chile), Pancho Quilici (Venezuela), Antonio Seguí (Argentina), among many others, not just for the ways they depicted time, space, and the American landscape, but also because he found in them a visual counterpart for his literary works. For instance, in 1955 Glissant published a book of poems titled *La Terre inquiète* illustrated with lithographs by Wifredo Lam. Perhaps touched by the parallels in their lives—the two of them had important homecomings to their respective islands after long sojourns in France—Glissant asked Lam to illustrate this collection of poems that constituted a meditation on the imaginative associations of land as country, motherland, and language.[58] For all effects, *La Terre inquiète* had been intended to be a collector's item: the original edition contained six types of sets, each one printed on a different kind of paper, some with Glissant's and Lam's signature, others came in a special casing, and in two of these sets, the lithographs were in color. The pains taken at the thoughtful publication of this book evince that Glissant had chosen Lam for his earthy iconography and for his forests, from which surfaced hybrid beings that dialogued seamlessly with Glissant's poems. A quick survey of the *Bibliographie annotée d'Édouard Glissant* written by Alain Baudot in 1993 reveals that the Martinican author had written over

[58] J. Michael Dash, *Édouard Glissant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44.

twenty exhibition catalogue essays or journal articles mostly about artists from Latin America (he published many more after the cutoff year of Baudot's book and until his death in early 2011). However numerous his writings on art are, this is an aspect of his oeuvre that has not been given focused attention.

I have to disclose that my former position as Research Coordinator of the International Center for the Arts of the Americas, housed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, specifically the work I did as researcher for the project *Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art* ignited in me a curiosity for primary documents written by outstanding artists and critics whose words have pushed for a new understanding, reassessment, and appreciation of artistic models overlooked by Euro and Anglo-centric views of art. Besides the fame he obtained as a novelist, poet, playwright, literary critic, and intellectual thinker of the Caribbean, Glissant also penned several art historical essays to which I will devote the analysis that follows in this section. From his more famous section on Haitian painting, published in the celebrated *Caribbean Discourse* (1981) to an interview with German curator Hans Ulrich Obrist in which he explains in detail his plans to open a museum of Latin American art in Martinique, Glissant comes through these pages as a keen observer of the creative ways in which Latin America and the Caribbean created their own artistic vocabulary.

In his essay "Haitian Painting," Glissant writes about the close association he sees between language and art. Specifically he says, "The painted symbol coexists with the oral sign"—where "painted symbol" refers to Haitian naïve painting and "oral sign" to Haitian Creole. He finds not just a parallel between the ways and strategies used to convey meaning in both Haitian painting and Creole but also a symbiotic relationship

between the two. For Glissant, spoken Creole decidedly does not rely on the written form for its visual counterpoint but finds in painting its "hinterland."[59] He adds, "Haitian Creole is practically insulated from *transformation*. [emphasis his] The painted symbol is its refuge."[60] The use of the hinterland as refuge of Haitian Creole thus suggests that Glissant conceived of Creole language as a subversive answer to the linguistic impositions that came with colonialism. In *Caribbean Discourse*, he speaks about how Creole, whose basic mode of expression is through orality, has been resistant to its standardization through the written form. For him, writing would entail "mastering" Creole, which means stifling the constant transformation practiced in the natural poetics of spoken Creole. Instead, by using the metaphor of the hinterland Glissant suggests an analogy between oral language, visual arts, and maroonage—Haitian painting being the mountainous forest that nurtured the survival of an autochthonous language during and after slavery.

Following this assertion, Glissant continues to explain that, as with the oral tradition of Haitian Creole, painting's paramount characteristic is simplification. By successfully lacking technical expertise, painting and spoken Creole are able to convey meaning in a way that is not contrived, as opposed to French and painting practices that use perspective or modulations in color. As a matter of fact, elsewhere Glissant has noted that the arts of the Americas are not concerned with perspective. Empty spaces and thus the possibility for vanishing points are not their driving force.[61] In the case of Haitian

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[59] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 155.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Édouard Glissant," in *Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interviews*, vol 2 (Florence: Fondazione Pitti Imagine Discovery, 2003), 282.

painting and Creole, instead of aiming to convey an idealistic or realistic version of life, Glissant argues that these two forms of expression insist on "the element of the marvelous," the "ability to create fantasy from a difficult, even wretched, reality."[62] For this, they employ different strategies, which, in the case of painting, include the "enlarged scale" and "the pilling up of the visible." About the former, the Martinican author notes, "Those children who bear the weight of a fruit as large as they are, are really related to the idea of bearing a load as practiced by the Haitian peasant."[63] Thus, for Glissant, telling a story through the use of marvelous imagery represents an alternate way of describing a difficult reality that dates back into the centuries and is not to be taken literally.

Stacking up figures, another strategy used by Haitian painters to depict crowds, in many cases also relies on repetition as in the case of Casimir Laurent's *Fete Creole* (figure 9). The tendency to fill out the space, or *horror vacui*, with a profusion of figures and repetition of colors and shapes signals to Glissant the naïve element of redundancy. This naïve trait of repetition is characteristic of both the oral text and the painted sign. To be sure, in Creole societies what allows a folktale to continue its survival is the repetition and passing on from an older to a younger generation. Glissant sees the same happening in painting. The notion of "authenticity" is challenged when "apprentices" of "masters" learn to reproduce a style perfectly and the final product is undistinguishable even to the

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[62] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 156.

[63] Ibid. In another article that I analyze later in this chapter, Glissant picks up the image of figures bearing or carrying a load as a physical exercise that goes back to the time of slavery and into the present.

most trained of eyes.[64] However, this assumed inability to tell the "valid" from the copy, and thus the ubiquity of Haitian paintings in places were uninformed buyers congregate, has created the notion that this so-called tourist art is devoid of significance beyond its monetary value when, in fact and according to Glissant, painting as well as spoken Creole is the discourse of an entire people, a community endeavor.[65] In relation to this, Glissant astutely comments "Tourism has increased the production that has become more schematic without becoming an industry." [66] One could say that this schematic reproduction *en masse* of so-called naïve paintings cleverly operates two different registers at the same time. On the one hand, the reproducibility of a story, leitmotif, or topic works in the same way as the use of repetition in the oral tradition of Creole languages, and on the other, Haitian painting has used its own profusion to make a profit in the market arena of what the mainstream art world has designated as tourist art.

Glissant's essay on Haitian painting is unique among his writings for the explicit links he draws between painting and language. As a signifying system, Creole does not fit the Western mold by which the oral form inevitably transitions into its written form. A similar phenomenon happens with art, according to Glissant. From his observations in regard to the handling of space in paintings made in the Americas—from the art of the Incas to Jackson Pollock—there is neither a historical continuation with Western art nor an *a priori* theory that explains the lack of interest in perspective and the tendency to fill

[64] Glissant added quotation marks around these words implying that these are not terms that are part of the discourse of Haitian painting but have been imposed from outside.

[65] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 157.

[66] Ibid.

in the spatial composition.[67] As explained in the following paragraphs, Glissant's writings, more than specialized critiques in art history, are skillful and astute observations by an amateur of the arts who sought to understand the artistic production in the Americas via a different, non-European, discourse.

As editor-in-chief of *The Courier*, UNESCO's leading magazine (figure 10), Glissant oversaw the publication of the journal from 1982 to 1988. Since its founding in 1948, *The Courier* has sought to promote UNESCO's ideals, maintain a platform for the dialogue between cultures and provide a forum for international debate.[68] Under Glissant's supervision, the magazine was published monthly in as many as thirty two languages including a selection in Braille published quarterly in French, English, and Spanish. Twenty-six essays about the Caribbean or Latin America were published under his watchful eye during which time he was living in France. But prior to taking the reigns of the journal, Glissant had already contributed an essay that prefigured not only the ideas he was putting into his books but also the art historical insights he would subsequently contribute as editor-in-chief of UNESCO's *The Courier*.

Published in December 1981, his essay "Creative Contradictions: The Caribbean Genius has Given Birth to a New Civilization" (figure 11) tackled the issue of explaining the impossibility of drawing boundaries or defining a logical cultural, political or geographic composition of the Caribbean. "What then is this reality," he asked, "which mushrooms out over the Americas, North and South, and which fits into no specific

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[67] Obrist, "Édouard Glissant," 282.

[68] The UNESCO Courier: A Unique Publication, http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco-courier/the-magazine/.

linguistic, political, or ethnic framework?"[69] A fruitful contradiction, Glissant would answer, one that eludes and frustrates those who see cultural and political indeterminacy as a failure of Western modernist thinking. For the purposes of this section, I am more interested, however, in the images he chose to illustrate and give form to his ideas.

In the opening page of the essay and next to the main text, appear two drawings (figure 12) by French surrealist artist André Masson that had first been published in 1947 in a book written by André Breton titled *Martinique: Charmeuse de serpents*. In a somewhat anthropophagic tone, Glissant's caption for these two drawings reverses the surrealist agenda of reading the exotic in Martinique's landscape. "The Crab and its Fortress," he explains, "seem to have emerged from the primordial mud, girded with a wooden cuirass. Woody yet members of the mineral world, they are nailed down by dry root which climb to the horizon where they suddenly become waving coconut palms. For the people of the Antilles, however, fortress crab can be, literally, shelled: at feasts on the banks of remote streams it makes a succulent sacrifice." By captioning Masson's drawings, Glissant takes control over the Surrealist's visual rhetoric; from what is presented as exotic, zoomorphic flora and fauna, Glissant turns into a matter of consumption, swallowed and digested by Caribbean people.

The second image in the "Creative Contradictions" essay (figure 13), a photograph of a Martinican woman carrying on her head a bunch of plantains, indirectly quotes another one of Masson's drawings. Next to the original drawing (figure 14), which

[69] Édouard Glissant, "Creative Contradictions: The Caribbean Genius has Given Birth to a New Civilization," *The UNESCO Courier*, December 1981, 33, http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0007/000747/074754eo.pdf#47853

appeared in the section titled "Bearer with No Burden" in *Martinique: Snake Charmer*, Masson wrote the following verses:

Et toujours au soleil la démarche des porteuses c'est le pied de Gradiva
Oui le sol est vraiment touché
La terre est appuyée[70]

There are, however, drastic differences between the accompanying text in Masson's drawing and the photograph included in Glissant's essay. Contrary to the surrealists' psychosexual obsession with the icon of Gradiva, Glissant's caption grounds the woman in the photograph in the historic materialism of the Caribbean, specifically to the laborious conditions women had to bear since the time of slavery. His caption reads, "On the cloth pad above her brow, for all the world to see, is the daily fare; her baskets are laden with modest treasures of poverty and dignity. Women have borne many things across the Caribbean: stones for the roads, coal from mysterious cargo boats, fruit and vegetables, the trials of everyday life, and the future of their children."[71] In a clever reversal of tone, Glissant shifts the attention from Gradiva's sensual gait to this anonymous woman's head and upper body. While Glissant's description of "this woman of Martinique"—easily a stand in for the island—relies on a set of essentialist ideas with regard to her gender and sexuality, one could argue that this was Glissant's way of de-exoticizing the surrealists' depiction of Martinique. Other strategies employed to create a distance with Breton and Masson, in addition to the caption, include refraining from

[70] "And always the carriers advance towards the sun - It is Gradiva's foot
Yes the ground is truly touched
The earth is supported"
For an analysis of the myth of Gradiva in a selection of André Masson's artworks and those of other surrealist artists, see Whitney Chadwick, "Masson's Gradiva: The Metamorphosis of a Surrealist Myth," *The Art Bulletin* 52, no. 4 (Dec., 1970): 415-422.

[71] Édouard Glissant, "Creative Contradictions," 35.

using the term Gradiva and the utilization of the medium of photography—a medium long valued, rather naively, for its claim to objectivity.

The final image in the "Creative Contradiction" article is of a sculpture by Cuban artist Agustín Cárdenas. *El Quarto Famba 1* from 1973 (figure 15) appears towards the end of the essay right when Glissant is expounding on his idea of creolization. The three-dimensional counterpart of Wifredo Lam, Cárdenas was praised for a visual vocabulary that was as much inscribed in the works of Brancusi and Henry Moore as in the wooden sculptures of the Dogon tradition in Mali. Cárdenas, originally from Matanzas and the son of enslaved people from Senegal and Congo, had lived in Paris where he had met Breton. In 1959 Cárdenas had a solo show for which Breton wrote the preface, and two years later, in 1961, at another one-man exhibition, it was Glissant who this time provided the introductory words to the catalogue.[72] It was not just on the work of Cárdenas that Breton's and Glissant's pathways had crossed; when Glissant was almost thirteen years of age, a transatlantic steamer arrived in Martinique carrying Breton, Masson, the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, and Wifredo Lam among others.

In a rare interview never before quoted, Glissant explains to curator Hans Ulrich Obrist two important things: first, the visit of these intellectuals signaled that Martinique exemplified a sort of hub that opened up to the American world, especially Latin America—an important point that I will approach later—and secondly, that in the 1950s and 60s, he was working in France with today's most prominent Latin American artists such as the Chilean Roberto Matta, Lam, and Cárdenas.[73] And so, the relationship

[72] Agustín Cárdenas, Jean Leymarie, and André Breton, *Agustín Cárdenas: Desire and Grace, May 16-July 13, 2002* (New York: Haim Chanin Fine Arts), 2002.

[73] Obrist, "Édouard Glissant," 277.

between Glissant and Cárdenas developed, distanced from the racially reductive discourse of Breton and the Surrealists.

In 1979 Glissant wrote another essay for an exhibition of Cárdenas' work in Paris. Titled "Seven landscapes for the sculptures of Cárdenas," also published in *Caribbean Discourse*, recounts how both of them visited each other in their respective countries of origin, but more importantly it deepens the reading and interpretation of Cárdenas's sculptures. While Breton's 1959 preface focused on the talent of his hands—"Here it is, emerging from his fingers, this great blooming totem which, better than a saxophone, curves the waist of lovely women"—Glissant's rhetoric, on the other hand, abandons the sexualized and phallic imagery in favor of a statement that bespeaks the symbolism of Cárdenas's overall work: "But we do not acclaim the overwhelming stature of any one tree, we praise this language of the entire forest. Cárdenas's sculpture is not a single shout, it is sustained speech: unceasing and deliberate, which is forever creating and at every turn *establishes* something new."[74] Moreover, two years later, in the "Creative Contradictions" essay, he adds: "These airy, smoothly-finished works typify the contact between cultures that has inspired Cárdenas's work in wood and marble, and show how an artist can draw profound inspiration from his roots yet also practice the boldest experimentation in art that is both affirmation and discovery."[75] Cárdenas, his work, and the discourses that surround it illustrate the process and creation of "forming a complex mix" characteristic of creolization while also leaving open the possibility for new and unexplored sculptural forms and references. An analysis of Glissant's writings on the arts

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[74] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 238-239.

[75] Édouard Glissant, "Creative Contradictions," 35.

of the Caribbean and the Americas, reveal a perceptive and astute observer who was drawn to artists whose works proposed original ways of relating to and challenging Eurocentric views of art.

His continued collaboration as writer and editor-in-chief to numbers such as "The Photographic Memory" demonstrate Glissant's interest in promoting the work of artists who, as himself, grappled with the vestiges of modernism. Looking at his texts on art, most of them published in *The Courier*, reveals a chain of relations between the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe. In his short text about Leo Morhor, titled "A Time-Spun Art" (figure 16) and published in 1988, Glissant mentions how the French photographer divides his time between the Antilles, Greece, and France and had just exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. His language is reminiscent of his books *Poetics of Relation* and *Caribbean Discourse*, and points to a search for subjectivity that is not facile, one that is as much a quest for arrival as it is the necessity to continue on a search. "It is an art," he wrote perhaps in reference to Morhor's photograph of André Masson, "which might be likened to a journey of initiation, throughout which the voyager seeks to attain the node, the focal point wherein all human care is subsumed." And, "There is response at the other end of this voyage. Morhor incites communication, the complicity of continuity." The inclusion of Morhor's photograph of Masson to illustrate this text is telling; Glissant affirms that Morhor establishes a dialogue with his interlocutors whose likeness reveals a deep vulnerability, unlike the caricaturesque drawings Masson did when he was in Martinique. It also confirms the Martinican author's interests in exploring visual ways in which the relation between beings is not fixed but fluid.

Glissant's views on art extend to a curatorial vision. In the 2001 interview with the famous German curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Glissant comments on his plans to open the Martinique Museum for the Arts of the Americas (also referred to as M2A2), a space that would house a historical and comparative encyclopedia of the arts of the Americas.[76] Glissant had a clear and forward-thinking vision of what this museum could accomplish: "It seems to me that reflecting on [all the possible connections from the arts of New Orleans to the Southern cone] in historical and comparative fashion may enable us to see what is newest and most up-to-date in terms of art across the continent."[77] Recapitulating the history that has been told about the Caribbean and Latin America was not to be the aim of this museum whose location in Martinique had a special significance for Glissant. For him, Fort-de-France was the ideal place for such an endeavor; as a focal point between North and South America, Martinique sits in the middle of the Lesser Antilles or Windward islands. Symbolically speaking, Martinique and the Caribbean are the grounds for a meeting of connections and comparisons between the Creole cultures spanning from the South of the United States to the South of the Americas. But more specifically, however, the place chosen to house this museum was a sugar and rum refinery built in 1850 and shut down in 1975. When asked about it, Glissant answered that for him it would be a museum that did not so much establish equivalences between the arts of different countries as much as connections between different timeframes. Also, the museum was to function as a repository of the collective memory of Martinique and of the particular memory of a specific economic history that was common in more than one

[76] Obrist, "Édouard Glissant," 277.

[77] Ibid.

area across the Americas. This chaotic reconstruction of time and the interconnectedness between the arts of one place during one time and that of another (or many possible others) led Glissant to envision this museum as an archipelago. Speaking in terms of quest and voyage, this archipelagic museum would set out to look for remaining traces of the past, as opposed to apprehending art as a static evidence of history. With respect to this point, Glissant thought to start the museum off with video interviews of all the former factory workers who were still alive as a way of imbuing the refinery with true accounts of their material conditions. This last point indicates Glissant's keen awareness that the museum as architecture or structure should be a sort of metalanguage used by Creole people to tell their own accounts of history. In a way, the analysis of this interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist is a way of tapping into the mindset of Glissant the curator, the Caribbean art historian who had the foresight of envisioning a museum that defied museification, which kept the vibrancy of interrelatedness alive and afloat.

Even though the M2A2 was never carried out before Glissant's death in 2011, there was already in place a collection of artworks that had been donated to him by first-rate Latin American painters and sculptors who had been working in Europe since the 1960s as well as contemporary Caribbean artists.[78] Works by Lam, Cárdenas, Roberto Matta, and others were going to be displayed along with other works that spanned from the Mayans to the present.[79] And despite the fact that the construction of the M2A2 could not come to fruition, conceptually the museum did briefly exist as an itinerant collection that was exhibited under the title *Salon d'Automne 2004* at the Maison de l'Amerique

[78] Édouard Glissant, *La Cohée du Lamentin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 258.

[79] Hans Ulrich Obrist, *N°038: Édouard Glissand and Hans Ulrich Obrist* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 5.

latine in Paris and later on travelled to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Peru, Jamaica, and Trinidad.[80] Also part of Glissant's curatorial ambitions was the eventual creation of an *Encyclopédie historique et comparée des Arts des Amériques*, a project along the same lines as the one carried out by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and titled *Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art*. For all of Glissant's (naïve) goals of having under one roof and under one publication an encyclopedic collection of Latin American and Caribbean art and artists, the intention and thinking behind this was to apply to the arts a creolized model by which the confluence of seemingly disparate sources would yield unexpected readings in the history of art.

As vast as Glissant's texts on art are it still holds true that his presence remains incomplete in the historiography of global, African diasporic, Latin American, and Caribbean art. While his concepts and theories have been widely recognized in the art world, the art world has not yet caught up to the full scope of Glissant's ideas. Discourses on art should take more to heart the processes of intercultural and interdisciplinary connections they so readily acknowledge and embrace all of the dimensions of this Caribbean thinker who spoke so openly about the arts.

[80] Glissant, *La Cohée*, 258.

Chapter Two

The Body of Creole:
Visual Constructions of Creole Subjecthood in Contemporary Caribbean Art

Definitions of who a Creole person is or what a Creole person looks like often involve awkward and impersonal listings of ethnicities. Take for example this catalogue of Creole attributions quoted in Stephan Palmié's "Creolization and its Discontents" from 2006:

> In Jamaica "Creole" designates anyone of Jamaican parentage except East Indians, Chinese, and Maroons… In Trinidad and Guyana it excludes Amerindians and East Indians; in Suriname it denotes the "civilized" coloured population, as apart from tribes of rebel-slave descent called Bush Negroes. In the French Antilles "Creole" refers more to local-born whites than to colored or black persons; in French Guyana, by contrast, it is used exclusively for nonwhites.[81]

Ancestry and race, specifically the way this last one is inscribed on the body, are typically at the center of discussions concerning concepts such as Creole, creolization, and creoleness. Given the strong visual component so heavily placed on descriptions of Creole people, it comes as a surprise that, until now, no scholar has attempted to analyze how definitions of Creole have been translated into the visual arts.[82]

I must admit that my own interpretation of what Creole means is influenced by my biography. In the context of Puerto Rico, where I was born and raised, I was taught

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[81] David Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 32, quoted in Stephan Palmié, "Creolization and its Discontents," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 441.

[82] One recent attempt, however, was the section titled "Shades of History" that was part of the three-venue exhibition *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. According to the brochure, "the works in *Shades of History* offer a broad perspective on the various ways artists have explored the significance and relevance of race to the history and visual culture of the Caribbean." Despite the high quality of many of the artworks shown and the non-literal approach taken in some cases in respect to race and ethnicity, for the most part "Shades of History" fell flat because it showcased race as color and as a positivist result of colonization. Missing from this section, at least for me, were works that questioned facile responses to the question of race in the Caribbean.

that a Creole or *criollo* person was someone who, regardless of their skin color, was born on the island from parents who came from elsewhere—mainly from Europe as early colonizers or from Africa as enslaved workers. It was not until I started to write this dissertation that I realized my fascination with the concept of Creole and creolization stemmed from my own search for a justification that, as someone born on the island from parents who immigrated in the mid-1970s, I had as much as stake in defining my own sense of Puerto Rican identity as those whose ancestors came as early as the late 15th century. Though not a term currently used, I was aware from a young age that my *criollidad* or sense of belonging was something that I could learn to accentuate while downplaying the physical and linguistic traits that could be used against my self-identification. In a word, I knew that, as a construct, there were ways of manipulating those tenuous features that would define me as someone *of the land*, as a Creole person.

Early school lessons in *criollidad* also taught me that it was those first men and women who, through a Creole consciousness, began developing a sense of autonomy from the motherland. Ramón Power y Giralt (1775-1813), for instance, the son of an Irish immigrant and first Puerto Rican-born lawyer to represent the island in the Spanish courts in 1809, was one of a group of *criollos* who succeeded in reducing the all-embracing powers of the Spanish government in Puerto Rico thus granting the island—for the first time since the Spanish conquest in 1493—room for political leeway.

As a matter of fact, the example of Ramón Power y Giralt is a fitting one to introduce this chapter because so much of what he represents in the history of Puerto Rico is linked to the visual record that has survived up to this day. In discussions about *nacionalismo criollo* (Creole nationalism), the painting made by an equally fascinating

figure, José Campeche, titled *El salvamento de Ramón Power y Giralt* (The Rescue of Ramón Power y Giralt, figure 17) from c. 1788-1790, represents one of the first examples of the role art played in portraying Creole people in Puerto Rico. As a member of the Creole aristocracy on the island, Power y Giralt went to Spain at a very young age, most likely around age 13, to join the Spanish Armada.

Campeche's painting depicts the moment when, after journeying on a frigate that was hit by a tempestuous storm outside the port of Bilbao in the Bay of Biscay, the young Power y Giralt misjudged the distance and instead of jumping into the rescuing boat fell into the stormy seas.[83] The Creole lawyer is portrayed in this painting as a boy, perhaps younger than what he actually was, and in his very pale face that directly looks out to the viewer one can read a combination of fear but also of salvation—a story that clearly references the way Moses was saved from the waters according to Christian and Jewish thought. Campeche's oil on canvas, which anticipates similar paintings such as J.M.W. Turner's *The Shipwreck* from 1805 and Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* from 1818-1819, foretells the symbolic, almost Messianic, role Power y Giralt would play for Puerto Rico. More than a portrait, *El salvamento* occupies in the history of Puerto Rican art a place of almost devotion. At the end of the eighteenth century, this painting was meant to summarize the infancy of Puerto Rico's call to political self-determination and the need for these ideas to mature.

Using Campeche's *El salvamento* as a point of departure, I would like to pose the main question that will guide this chapter: How is the Creole body visually constructed in

[83] José Campeche, *José Campeche y su tiempo = José Campeche and his time* (Ponce, PR: Museo de Arte de Ponce, 1988), 151. His parents attributed Ramón Power y Giralt's rescue to a miracle performed by Our Lady of Bethlehem and commissioned Campeche to paint this event as a form of gratitude—a common practice in Latin America also known as the painting of *ex-votos*.

contemporary Caribbean art and what does this visual construction say about Caribbean identities? Aside from providing a visual record of the composition of what a Creole person might look like, what are the benefits of looking at portraits for answers concerning the dynamics of creoleness in this region? As the overview on Creole and creolization surveyed in the introduction indicate, the body is often the vehicle that carries those visual markers, the telltale signs of a person's membership in a Creole society.

In this chapter, I formally analyze three examples stemming from the major linguistic clusters in the Caribbean—Hispano-, Anglo-, and Francophone Caribbean—where the construction of the Creole body is often conflated to race and summarized through the epidermis of the sitter. I argue, however, that there are other transversal signifiers that are inscribed in the body such as gender, class, sexuality, and citizenship that disrupt simple definitions. The three examples covered in this chapter—Miguel Luciano's *Plátano Pride* (2006), Joscelyn Gardner's *Creole Portraits* (2002-2003), and Jean-Ulrick Désert's *Negerhossen2000* (2000-present)—deconstruct colonial strategies that have dictated Creole bodies as objects of knowledge and, instead, articulate Caribbean subjecthood as a complex process informed by multiple subject positionings.

2.1 The Tenuous Sense of Race in Puerto Rican *Jíbaro* Portraits

"Mata de plátano, a ti,
a ti te debo la mancha
que ni el jabón ni la plancha
quitan de encima de mí.
Desque jíbaro nací
al aire llevo el tesoro
de tu racimo de oro
y tu hoja verde y ancha;

Llevaré siempre la mancha
por secula seculorum."
-"Mancha de plátano" by Luis Lloréns Torres

"I gotta change man it's a stain on my white tee"
-"White Tee" by Dem Franchize Boyz

The icon of the *jíbaro*, the quintessential Puerto Rican peasant that resides in the countryside of the island, has been deployed in art for at least two centuries. When depicted with a bunch of plantains, this figure becomes doubly charged with a Puerto Rican essence that, as the phrase goes, *la mancha de plátano* (the plantain's stain), is hard to erase. Puerto Rican-born, New York-based artist Miguel Luciano plays with this popular leitmotif in Puerto Rican art in his *Plátano Pride* photograph from 2006 (figure 18). The different registers at work in this seemingly simple composition—the boy, his oversized t-shirt, and the plantain necklace that hangs around his neck—openly question the romanticized and unchallenged use of the tropes of the *jíbaro* and the plantain in Puerto Rican art and visual culture.

In this photograph, the sole figure of a prepubescent, brown-skinned boy stands against an all-black backdrop. Looking frontally and with his head assertively tilted to the left, the young boy is seen wearing a pristine, oversized white t-shirt and, resting on top of it, an equally oversized chain with a platinum plantain as its pendant. His right-hand thumb casually lifts part of the necklace in a gesture that, combined with the lopsided head, denotes unapologetic pride for the "bling" or shiny piece of jewelry that hangs around his neck and next to his heart.[84] The plantain pendant that Luciano uses in this and

[84] This gesture is reminiscent of many others, of course. But, for Puerto Ricans, this pose and the sense of pride it depicts particularly brings to mind the iconic photo taken of Carlos Arroyo, a member of the Puerto Rico national basketball team, after they defeated the United States 92-73 in a match during the Athens Olympics in 2004. This was the third time the US basketball team had lost a game (and the first one since allowing professionals to compete) in the Olympics. For more information and for access to the photo see: Randy Kim, "Arroyo's Arrival," http://www.nba.com/athens2004/arroyo_040818.html

other works that are part of the *Pure Plantainum* series, all from 2006, was made with a real plantain cast in platinum that is presumably rotting inside.

For those familiar with Puerto Rican art, the presence of the plantain will seem recognizable since it is a direct reference to Ramón Frade's *El pan nuestro* (Our daily bread), a realist painting from 1905. On the other hand, the white tee worn by the boy together with the bling recall the style of dress and accouterments seen in American hip-hop videos. While the origins of the white t-shirt or tee are somewhat unclear some say that they came into style at basketball courts in New York where the blank shirts, devoid of gang colors, became the ensemble de rigueur. Others say that it became a trend picked up from prison yards.[85] Either of these two scenarios is plausible in an urban area such as New York City where Luciano's art practice is based. Though it would be interesting to pursue in depth the links between African American visual and material culture—where the white tee and the so-called "bling-bling" became popular—and that of other diasporic communities such as the Nuyorican,[86] for the purposes of this chapter I will concentrate on how the whiteness of the outfit often worn by the *jíbaro* was strategically used as a metaphor that encompassed a particular ethnicity and the essence of an elusive sense of Puerto Ricanness. As the one example from the Spanish Caribbean to be analyzed in this chapter, Luciano's *Plátano Pride* will help shed light on the racial and political implications of creating a *criollo* subject that differs from his Anglo, Franco, and Dutch Creole counterparts.

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[85] Dwayne Campbell, "Whatever the weather, big and white suit them to a tee," http://articles.philly.com/2006-01-29/news/25411974_1_t-shirts-jeans-disruptive-atmosphere

[86] In the field of music, this topic has been smartly covered by Wayne Marshall in his "From Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino: The Cultural Politics of Nation, Migration, and Commercialization," in *Reggaeton* ed. Raquel Z. River, et. al. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 19-76.

From a historic standpoint, the *jíbaro* trope initially surfaced as a discursive mask behind which nineteenth-century writers from Puerto Rico disguised their oppositional politics by passing themselves off as native peasants from the rural areas of the island, according to historian Francisco Scarano.[87] In his study, "The Jíbaro Masquerade and the Subaltern Politics of Creole Identity Formation in Puerto Rico, 1745-1823," Scarano provides a particularly insightful analysis of how the "masqueraders" appropriated the *jíbaro* disguise as a way of pushing their subaltern agenda, against conservative politicians who continued to support the Spanish crown, as a way of gaining more autonomy on the island.

Etymologically speaking, scholars are unsure of when and how the term began to be used in the island; however, outside of the Puerto Rican context, the word *jíbaro* has three different definitions yet all of them are used in a pejorative sense. In Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela, *jivaro* is the name given to an indigenous group that became famous for its indomitable character yet effective resistance to colonial encroachment; in colonial Mexico, it was the *casta* category given to the offspring of Indians and Africans; and in Cuba and Santo Domingo, the word is used as an adjective to describe animal wildness.[88] Even though it is uncertain why and when rural peasants of Puerto Rico began to be called by this name, what can be surmised is that the negative connotations carried by these three meanings of the word *jíbaro* delineate the general attitude associated with the term.[89] This is an important point in the context of Creole studies

[87] Francisco Scarano, "The Jíbaro Masquerade and the Subaltern Politics of Creole Identity Formation in Puerto Rico, 1745-1823," *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 5 (Dec., 1996): 1398-1431.

[88] Ibid., 1414.

[89] What is clear is that by the 1820s, the term was being used in print to refer to Creole farmworkers from the highlands of Puerto Rico.

since Puerto Rico is often dismissed from discussions of Creoleness coming out of the West Indies and the French Caribbean solely based on what I can speculate is a reductive equation of whiteness and elitism. While it is true that the signifier of the *jíbaro* peasant was consciously constructed along a discourse of whiteness (as it is discussed later in this section), the elite masqueraders chose this group precisely because it represented an oppressed mass. Thus, the fact that the quintessential *criollo* in Puerto Rico was depicted in the visual arts and in literature as a descendent of Europeans (and thus suppressing any signs of African ancestry) does not mean that this was a figure with the same access to power as the intellectual group that manipulated his image.

Despite the extensive literature written on the *jíbaro* character and the political purpose it served in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, very little has been said about the pictorial language used to represent this iconic symbol of Puerto Ricanness. In fact, Scarano uses a colonial painting to illustrate, literally, his argument. However, the work itself—a self-portrait by Spanish exiled painter Luis Paret y Alcázar from 1776 (figure 19)—goes unexplained save for a meager sentence included in the caption. According to Scarano, "In this early version of the *jíbaro* masquerade, Luis Paret y Alcázar humorously portrays himself as a poor peasant in order to appeal for pity from the court."[90] But, exactly what makes this portrait humorous? And what does this humorous depiction say about the incipient Puerto Rican identity signified through the sign of the *jíbaro*? What Scarano fails to mention is that Paret y Alcázar was a royal painter to prince Louis, king Charles III's younger brother, and had been exiled to Puerto Rico in 1775

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[90] Ibid., 1418.

after the artist was accused of soliciting women for the prince.[91] The painting, thus, was a way of asking for forgiveness from the king and be allowed to return to Spain.

Wearing a saggy white blouse and loose fitting pants in this self-portrait, Paret y Alcázar appeals to the king's benevolence by presenting him with an unappealing portrait of what he has become in the year he has been away from the homeland. The bunch of plantains that Paret y Alcázar holds over his right shoulder and the machete on his right hand implies that he now has to fetch for his own food yet this is not enough to keep him well nourished. This, in turns, explains the ill-fitting clothes and hollow eyes and cheekbones.[92] The tombstone-like structure next to his left arm foreshadows the end of his days. The only piece of clothing harking back to Europe is the broad-brimmed hat that would not have been worn by the *jíbaro* peasant he is otherwise mimicking.[93] The "humor" of which Scarano speaks, therefore, resides in the absurdity of having someone close to the royal family transmogrified into a poor countryman from one of Spain's colony. The punishment for Paret y Alcázar, however, has been so harsh he has not only been exiled from his mother country but he is now also losing his identity and becoming one more *criollo* man.

Paret y Alcázar's visual plea eventually paid off for he returned to his native Spain in 1778, two years after painting this self-portrait. One can even say that his appeal

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[91] Xavier Bray, Enciclopedia Online, Museo Nacional del Prado, http://www.museodelprado.es/enciclopedia/enciclopedia-on-line/voz/paret-y-alcazar-luis/

[92] For a comparison of his appearance, please see: Luis Paret y Alcázar, *Autoretrato en el estudio*, oil on canvas, ca. 1780, Wikipedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Autorretrato_de_Luis_Paret.jpg

[93] The *jíbaro* wore a *pava*—a traditional peasant hat made out of the leaves of palm tress. In the late 1930s, the *pava* became the political symbol for Puerto Rico's Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party). For more information, see: Auralís Herrero-Lugo, "La pava y su historia artesanal en Puerto Rico," last modified May 1, 2011, http://www.elpuntoes.com/pavas-puerto-rico-historia-artesanal

to return back to his country was based on the visual evidence that showed Paret y Alcazar debased to the lower class of colonial *criollos*, a far cry from the royal status he had enjoyed in the past, and that two years of being imprisoned in an island had been sufficient punishment. Thus, this painting captures how—despite still being under Spanish rule—a burgeoning Puerto Rican character had been born as early as the eighteenth century and with it the island was in a protracted path toward obtaining greater autonomous powers from Spain. By the end of the nineteenth century and beginnings of the twentieth and with Puerto Rico's independence unachieved, the island had shifted from Spanish hands to American ones after the United States obtained the Caribbean island, along with Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines, as part of the booty won in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Yet, throughout time, the figure of the *jíbaro* as a symbol of cultural nationality continued to represent resistance and defiance in the face of colonization. As we will see in the next section, the secure sense of national stability that the *jíbaro* represented during times of political indeterminacy relied on a highly manipulated image by the *criollo* elite that was working against other competing interests. The ways in which the myth of the twentieth-century *jíbaro* was created, which Miguel Luciano later deconstructs with his *Plátano Pride*, will be analyzed below.

No other painting consolidates the visual language of the *jíbaro* like Ramón Frade's *Our bread* (figure 20). In fact, along with musician Rafael Hernández and sociologists Antonio S. Pedreira and Miguel Meléndez Muñoz, Frade is considered one of the leading figures to lend a voice to the *jíbaro*; it should be noted, of course, that of all these illustrious personalities, Frade was the first to contribute a work that would lead

to the creation of this national hero.[94] Painted in 1905 and standing at five feet by three feet, the painting depicts a full-fledged and mature *jíbaro* walking down a hill. The shoeless, arresting figure shares with regal portraits the upward perspective and a central position in the foreground granting him, thus, an air of importance. If Paret y Alcázar's self-portrait depicts him as a man facing the gloomy reality of near starvation, Frade's *jíbaro* fills his clothes instead; the bundle of plantains nursed between his arms and placed right in front of his stomach indicates access to a steady source of food.

Scholars agree that this painting gained attention in the 1940s, several decades after it was made, when Puerto Rico's Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party or PPD) consolidated in the figure of the rural laborer from the coffee highlands the main ideals of the political party. Anthropologist Jorge Duany's words remind us why the mountainous region of the island was such an attractive site for the PPD to develop a campaign heavily based on rural symbols:

> The center of the economy and the population was not in the sugar plantations on the coast, but in the inland mountain regions, which were the bastion of a semifeudal order, based on the cultivation of coffee. It was in these isolated rural communities that the Creolization of Hispanic cultural elements proceeded further, and it was here that gradually developed a sense of insular identity…[95]

As such, Frade's *Our bread* was, if not a source, at least an inspiration, a visual shorthand that exemplifies the political platform of the PPD: the populist agenda of the party is coded in the poor and barefoot *jíbaro* but not in a menacing way—the innocuous machete

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[94] Efraín Barradas, "Ramón Frade o de por qué es necesario, a veces, brindar con vino de plátano," *Plástica* 1, no. 13 (Jul. 1985): 70.

[95] Jorge Duany, "Ethnicity in the Spanish Caribbean: Notes on the Consolidation of Creole Identity in Cuba and Puerto Rico," *Ethnic Groups* no. 6 (1985): 32.

that hangs from the waist of Frade's peasant is conspicuously absent in PPD imagery.[96] Other elements present in the painting and on which the PPD would base its political campaign include the primacy of the land, which was meant as an invitation for greater US industrial investment, and the identification of the *jíbaro* as a white peasant. The racialization of Puerto Rico's rural worker as white should be seen as a strategic maneuver on the part of the island's elitist groups to erase discursively the black population, most of which worked on the coastal regions, and thus build the myth of a one, true, quintessential Puerto Rican.

In order to show how quickly the idealized image of Frade's humble and noble Puerto Rican could be overturned let us consider for a moment a photo contemporaneous with *Our bread*. On the cover of *Uncinariasis (Hookworm Disease) in Porto Rico: A Medical and Economic Problem* (figure 21) published in 1911—just six years after Frade's painting—by Colonel Bailey K. Ashford, a US Army physician, and Pedro Gutiérrez Ingravidez, a Puerto Rican doctor and director of the Tropical and Transmissible Diseases Services of Puerto Rico, we can see the photo of a sick peasant from the mountain region of the island.[97] Although an analysis of these photos in the context of the US military (and medical) occupation of Puerto Rico falls outside the scope of this dissertation, suffice it to say that their juxtaposition to the painting by Frade

[96] For more information about the symbols used by the PPD and photos taken in the late 1930s and 1940s by Edwin Rosskam, Jack Delano, and others, see: Oscar E. Vázquez, "'A Better Place to Live': Government agency photography and the transformation of the Puerto Rican," in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place* (London: Routledge, 2002), 281-315.

[97] According to the authors, their main patient was the *jíbaro*. He must have been such an idiosyncratic subject that the authors had to recur to a section succinctly titled "The Jibaro" in order to know and understand him: "Our patient has been in times past the jibaro [*sic*] and will be in times to come. As we have seen already, while all country districts furnish an incredible number of worm sick, the great breeding place of *Necator americanus* are the coffee plantations, and this is the home of 'el palido' (the pale man) of Porto Rico." Bailey K. Ashford and Pedro Gutiérrez Ingravidez, *Uncinariasis (Hookworm Disease) in Porto Rico: A Medical and Economic Problem* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1911), 11.

begins to speak about the agendas behind visual works and the not-so-innocent eye of the man, be him, behind the easel or the camera. It would be easy to give documentary authority to the photos taken by the Puerto Rico Anemia Commission of the hookworm epidemic that hit thousands of *jíbaros* in Puerto Rico at the turn of the twentieth century.[98] But there is no denying that the sanitation campaign, and the ensuing photographs, also gave the US an immediate image boost as the savior of the sick in the recently occupied island. Next to the medical reports, these photographs gave visual testimony to a poverty- and disease-stricken island where—had it not been for the US's resources and expertise—anemia in Puerto Rico would have risen exponentially. In other words, if we take something as mundane as the fact that the *jíbaro* presumably prefers to walk barefoot and we compare the messages conveyed in both Frade's *Our bread* and the medical report on the hookworm epidemic we get a very different sense of the qualities that make up this *criollo* man. According to Ashford and Gutiérrez Ingravidez:

> [U]rcinariasis has its great breeding place in the coffee plantations of Puerto Rico, and here barefooted people pollute the soil and are infected and reinfected by it until the life of every man, woman, and child is punctuated by vast numbers of reinfections, casual yet common in the nine months of ordinary work, certain and continuous during the coffee harvest when no worker escapes who is without shoes.[99]

To be sure, it is not necessarily the veracity of these facts that I would like to dispute; rather, what interests me is to call attention to the visual and textual rhetoric used whenever unequal relations of power meet in arenas of purported objectivity. This is the case of *Uncinariasis (Hookworm Disease) in Porto Rico* where, in order to justify the

[98] For more information about the eradication campaign against hookworm in Puerto Rico, see José G. Amador, "'Redeeming the Tropics:' Public Health and National Identity in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil, 1890-1940" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), ProQuest (UMI Number 3328752).

[99] Ashford and Gutiérrez Ingravidez, *Uncinariasis*, 11.

medical intervention of the US, the *jíbaro* has to be painted as superstitious folk who lack "knowledge of the world" and is skeptical of hard science.[100] But a similar argument could be made about Frade's painting. As someone who did not belong to the low-working class of these mountain peasants, Frade mythicizes the *jíbaro* by giving him specific phenotypic characteristics that were perhaps closer to the way the Puerto Rican elite wanted to be seen. That is, in *Our bread* we see the political agenda of upper crust *criollos* "masquerading" as the common man of Puerto Rico.

It is against this whitened and glorified image of the *jíbaro* that Luciano is responding to with his *Plátano Pride* photograph. By making what used to be an adult *jíbaro* figure in Frade's painting now a pre-adolescent boy, the New York-based artist is making a commentary about the shallowness involved in holding on to a symbol of Puerto Ricanness that has not and will not have a direct effect on the political status of the island. The heaviness of the plantain bunch that Frade's *jíbaro* figure carries in his hands has now been turned into one single plantain that, due to its platinum coating, is probably comparable in weight. However, there is no escaping the consumerist veil at the center of this photograph. Cultural anthropologist Arlene Dávila explains: "The proud boy is depicted showing off the plantain jewelry; but is he most proud of the expensive platinum jewelry or of its depiction of a plantain? Or are both intrinsically connected? With the plantain's platinum plating, Luciano calls attention to the shiny superficial cloak of consumer culture and to the ways it facilitates particular fronts, feelings, and identities

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[100] "The jibaro is equally superstitious and very quickly impressed by a supernatural explanation of any phenomena he can not understand. The more outlandish the explanation of a disease the better he likes it, and for this reason the 'curandero' or local charlatan is so popular and powerful in the mountains. We very much fear that our abrupt tumbling in the dust of ancient explanations of his anemia, our assertion that it was due to 'worms' and our administration of 'strong medicine' which practically put him hors de combat for the day, accounts for part of our early success." Ibid, 14.

among all of us."[101] By using the most precious of metals to coat a plantain that is otherwise rotting on the inside, Luciano points to a shift in priorities: while the plantains in Frade's *Our daily bread* were used as a symbol of collective essence (implied in the use of "our" in the title) that bound together Puerto Ricans across class (although not across race), Luciano, on the other hand, uses his platinum plantain to poke holes at this myth. When no real political outcome can be experienced from this shared essentialism then pride in being Puerto Rican becomes reduced to nothing more than a commodity.

Another consequence of this precious coating is that it prevents the *mancha de plátano* (the plantain's stain) from blemishing the boy's pristine t-shirt. In Puerto Rican parlance, the *mancha de plátano* refers to the inevitable stain left when the produce is cut from the tree. The difficulty of cleaning off the stain has been used figuratively to express that unavoidable characteristic that identifies one as Puerto Rican; it is the *je ne sais quoi* of Puerto Rican being. It is an expression proclaimed with pride and it is also highly coveted for someone to pronounce your *mancha de plátano*. In *Plátano Pride*, however, the blinding whiteness of the t-shirt is preserved replacing, thus, another set of values over the plantain's stain. If taken literally, this *mancha de plátano* would have to be darker than the person's complexion in order for it to be noticeable. It is not too difficult for Frade's *jíbaro* to attain this stain for he is a man modeled according to European Spanish traits; however, I believe, the expression is a turn of phrase conceived as a way of darkening this quintessential Puerto Rican man's skin without necessarily having to acknowledge his African ancestry. Luciano leaves behind the emptiness of an anachronistic expression and literalizes the darkening of this so-called stain by presenting

[101] Arlene M. Dávila, *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 120.

us a boy whose real *mancha de plátano*, his give-away characteristic of being Puerto Rican, is the brownness of his skin.

2.2 Braiding Histories: Female Relationality in Barbadian Contemporary Art

In describing *Creole Portraits* (2002-2003), the first of three eponymous lithographic prints series, Joscelyn Gardner explains that she wanted to "experiment with representing *a shared Creole identity* by constructing ambiguous images of the back of female heads that recall nineteenth century abolitionist illustrations" (my emphasis).[102] Gardner, a white Barbadian artist interested in exploring the complex historical interactions shared by black and white women in the Caribbean, presents in these series of prints "anti-portraits" of the backs of black women's heads whose elaborate hairstyles morph into weapons of torture of the kind used during the slavery period.[103] As works that call into question the role that visual and literary portraiture has played in defining the boundaries of black bodies, Gardner's "anti-portraits" defy patriarchal impositions of power by developing an intimate network of female relationality.[104] Summoning ideas from queer theory and Creole studies, I investigate in this section how a "shared Creole identity" is brokered between a white Caribbean artist and her black female subjects.

We must begin by acknowledging the importance of the lithographic medium in this particular case, or better yet, the rejection of the more contemporary medium of photography to represent the female heads in Gardner's *Creole Portrait* series. In "The

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[102] Joscelyn Gardner, "Creole Portraits," Printmaking Section on Joscelyn Gardner's Webpage, http://www.joscelyngardner.com/

[103] Joscelyn Gardner, "Statement," Joscelyn Gardner's Webpage, http://www.joscelyngardner.com/

[104] For a discussion of the concept of anti-portrait see Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 173.

Evidence of Things Not Photographed: Slavery and Historical Memory in the British West Indies," Krista Thompson warns us against the misappropriation of photographs to represent that which was absent from the purview of the camera. In other words, she argues that the erroneous and indiscriminate use of late nineteenth-century photographs to depict the slavery period in the Caribbean—as has been the case in many history books—homogenizes the experience under enslavement and the post-emancipation system.[105] To be clear, if the apprenticeship system came to an end in the Anglo-Caribbean in 1838—the year photography was developed—then the use of photographs of black or mixed-blood people working the fields to depict the slavery system is necessarily fraught with both a sheer dismissal of those who had been recently emancipated and a desire to return to the old days before abolition. Thompson finds troublesome that, in the absence of a photographic archive that portrays the reality of slavery (when it actually happened), photos from the late nineteenth-century have been taken as indicative of this system when, in fact, it is the absence of these images what should be analyzed for what they reveal. That is, "absences in the photographic record should be viewed not as a lack for which compensation is necessary, but as an intrinsic part of, and even representation of, the history of slavery and post-emancipation in the region."[106] It is with this "representational space of absence" in mind that I would like to turn to Gardner's *Creole Portraits*.

The first installment of *Creole Portraits*, which consisted of a suite of ten lithographs printed on frosted Mylar, was followed by a second study titled *Creole*

[105] Krista Thompson, "The Evidence of Things Not Photographed: Slavery and Historical Memory in the British West Indies", *Representations* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 39-40.

[106] Ibid, 63.

Portraits II (A Collection of Singular & Scarce Creole Portrait Heads to Perpetuate the Memory of the Women of Egypt Estate in Jamaica) (figure 22) commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum in 2007. As with the previous series of prints, the second set of back-facing portraits embrace the absence of a photographic archive by creating a new form of representational presence. Her lithographs show the meticulous composition of braided heads with objects of torture attached to them. Each of the portraits bears the name of a woman whose only other portrayal was in the archival records of Thomas Thistlewood, the overseer of the sugar-estate of Egypt in Jamaica during the second half of the eighteenth century. In his 10,000-page diary, which he kept from 1750, the year he left for Jamaica, to 1786, the year he died, Thistlewood catalogues the many enslaved women with whom he had sexual intercourse. For instance, of Nago Jenny—one of the women who worked in Egypt and whose head portrait Gardner recreates in *Creole Portraits II* (figure 23)—Thistlewood writes, "Tuesday, 3rd December 1751: Last night *Cum* Jenny 111 in *me lect.* Wednesday 4th. Jenny continue with me *ad noctibus*."[107]

His sexual licentiousness was only matched by his use of physical violence. Writing about Acoobah, another enslaved woman with whom he had had sexual relations and who subsequently fled in 1771, Thistledwood describes:

> Wednesday, 4th December 1771: About noon, received a letter from Mr. Samuel Say, by Lincoln, who also brought home Coobah. She was catched among the Old Hope canes by one of their watchmen, and carried to Mr. Say. p.m. Flogged Coobah, put a chain about her neck. Wrote to Mr. Peter Richardson, and sent her to Masemure by Lincoln. Both to go in the field tomorrow morning. Gave each a bitt to buy provision with.[108]

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[107] Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86* (Londong and Basingstoke: The McMillan Press, 1989), 32.

[108] Ibid, 182.

I interpret Gardner's portraits as a postcolonial visual response to a colonial textual portrayal of the objectification of women under the system of slavery in Jamaica. As the reverse example of traditional eighteenth-century portraits where white European men would appear depicted wearing a wig as a symbol of status, Gardner's *Creole Portraits* highlights the tools that enabled these men to access power in the first place. The dark side of portraiture—the silences and gaps not quite captured in those portraits that were meant to celebrate the greatness of men—comes through in this series with the same sharpness as the end of Thistledwood's whip.

Furthermore, by completely doing away with the mise-en-scène that had previously served as backdrop for the physical and sexual abuses that had kept women objectified—under the valence of "discipline"—Gardner erases the surrounding narrative that somehow justified the punishment these women received for their alleged wrongdoings. In a print from around 1834-1838 (figure 24) that depicted what was ironically called the "dancing treadmill" or the "Jamaican treadmill" used in the correctional system in Jamaica, a group of men and women prisoners hang from a bar while they move their feet in a stepping motion in order to make the machine turn around. Besides the whipping that the men and women received at the treadmill, a further punishment was reserved for women. The scene closest to the foreground shows two men holding down a woman as they shave her hair off. The triple act of violence suggested in the setting of this portrait of a scene from the eighteenth century—the physical torture carried out in the treadmill, the emotional and psychological suffering implied in the cutting of the hair, and the sexual abuse forced on to female prisoners by the male wardens—is pushed outside the boundaries of Gardner's prints.

Instead, by choosing different hairstyles and objects of torture for each of her prints, Gardner is granting them an imagined subjectivity, one that does not idealize them but neither reduces them to the sexual acts recorded in Thistlewood's diary. Moreover, the fact that Gardner chose stone lithography as her medium, as opposed to carbon drawing or photography, signals an interest in the laborious process of printmaking, one whose meticulousness is akin to the braiding of hair. The intimate act of braiding on paper, as it were, the hair of the women who lived in the Estate of Egypt in Jamaica is a way of healing the act of humiliation and de-individualization carried out in the shaving of enslaved women's heads and other abuses. In regard to her *Creole Portraits II*, Joscelyn Gardner has observed: "As sites of both ritual enactment of love between women (the slow, careful act of braiding hair) and the pain associated with the physical and mental degradation of slavery, these hybrid images resonate as metaphors for the weight of history in contemporary postcolonial societies."[109] I would like to concentrate on this last point as I believe it is a queer aesthetic what ultimately allows Gardner to render "a shared Creole identity" in these prints.

My argument goes beyond the sensuous qualities that are part of the graphic nature of stone lithography. I am more interested in fleshing out how, paired with the fact that these are prints of different braid styles, *Creole Portraits II* can be construed as a queer gesture extended from Gardner as the braider to her female subjects. I would like to suggest that these sets of prints argue for a definition of Creoleness based on intimacy

[109] Joscelyn Gardner, "Postcolonial Portraits: 'Speaking the Unspeakable,'" in *White Skin, Black Kin: "Speaking the Unspeakable"* (St. Michaels, Barbados: The Barbados Museum & Historical Society, 2004), 54.

and relationality and not on a sense of filiation predicated on race.[110] Thus, I use queer here not in the sense of a gay or lesbian identity—although I do not think the prints necessarily reject this idea—but as praxis of resistance. To be clear, and borrowing Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's words, I use queer "in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths."[111]

I believe this definition of queerness as "interpersonal connections" provided by Tinsley can be extended, as the case of Gardner's work demonstrates, to a relationality tied not only to race but also to gender. The loving act of "slowly engraving on the stone, drawing into the image with litho crayons, processing it, and transferring it to the skin-like Mylar surface" and how it "echoes the careful, laborious, and sisterly act of braiding hair"[112] happens in a space where the figure of man, any man, is consciously absent save for the objects of torture that serve as reminders that creolization is always already marked by violence. Thus, the type of kinship promoted in these prints is not rooted on the filiation model of building communities that are typical of patriarchal societies but on what Glissant called a poetics of relation.

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[110] The seed of this idea comes from: Guillermina De Ferrari, *Vulnerable States: Bodies of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction* (Charlottsville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 13. In her introduction, De Ferrari mentions: "While these and other theoretical efforts have had sweeping ambitions, the conceptualizations they generated have largely focused their attention on miscegenation, privileging race over other social, cultural, or political considerations….The tendency to focus on race seems to have had the unintended result of reducing a larger debate into a more limited, rather static discussion."

[111] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2008): 199.

[112] Gardner, "Subverting Colonial Portraiture: A Contemporary Memorial to the Women of Egypt State" *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 118.

What prompted me to analyze these prints by an artist whose artistic influence has been the representation of a white postcolonial Creole feminism was the "shared Creole identity" that she purports to depict. How exactly can a shared Creole identity be represented? Where does the sharing start and where does it end? What are the implications of this "sharing"? And, on what common ground did a Creole identity occur?

Glissant referred to relation as being made up of, not "things that are foreign, but of shared knowledge."[113] He was, of course, referring to a relation that happened in what he called the abyss: that which is opposite to an origin. In Glissantian terms, the abyss is much more than the bottom of the sea and the reference to violence that such a term implies. The abyss also refers to the dark and violent side of history that brought different groups of people with access to different levels of power together. The abyss—and more importantly, the relation or relationality that transpires in this depth—is the manifestation of exchange when the notion of root is no longer a possibility that applies to the Caribbean. In the words of Glissant:

> Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violent belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed.[114]

It is on the experiences that happened between black and white women in the Caribbean that Gardner bases the "shared Creole identity" that is the foundation of her work.

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[113] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 8.

[114] Ibid, 7.

While *Creole Portraits II* articulates through the act of hair braiding the loving bond between a white Creole woman—Gardner—and enslaved black women—named after the women who lived Egypt Estate in Jamaica—her work, *White Skin, Black Kin: A Creole Conversation Piece* (figure 25) from 2003, elucidates the grounds on which this relationship most likely took place. Gardner's motivation for examining the ties between black and white women in the Caribbean can be surmised in the following quote: "Undeniably, Creole women have shared an intertwined (though unequal) history. Ideologically pitted against each other in colonial terms, they have nevertheless shared deep connections with each other through familial ties and intimacy with the white master's body—ties that are perhaps greater than most postcolonial Creoles may be willing to admit to."[115] In the family portrait that Gardner presents in *White Skin, Black Kin*, she has not elided the black female servants nor the biracial kin that was the result of the sexual aggressions by the white master who, in this mise-en-scène, has been pushed all the way to the background. Neither does Gardner gloss over the hierarchies that were most certainly in place in a great house such as the one where she stages the installation. What she seeks to underscore in this work is the "shared status as property under the patriarchal bonds of marriage and slavery."[116]

Perhaps the most famous work that investigates the experience of white Creole women in the Caribbean is *Wide Sargasso Sea* written by Dominica-born Jean Rhys at the end of her career. Conceived as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's 1847 British novel *Jean Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* speculates on the life of Bertha Mason, the first wife of

[115] Gardner, "Shared Lives, Disparate Histories: The Topsy-Turvy Relationship of Creole Women," in *White Skin, Black Kin: "Speaking the Unspeakable"* (St. Michaels, Barbados: The Barbados Museum & Historical Society, 2004), 50.

[116] Ibid, 45.

Edward Rochester in the book by the English author. The character of Bertha, whose original name was Antoinette Cosway before Mr. Rochester renamed her, was a white Creole woman from Jamaica, who ends up going insane, locked in an attic, and finally committing suicide. But in Jamaica, where Mr. Rochester goes to woo her, we see a side of Antoinette imagined by Rhys as that of "a white Creole child growing up at the time of emancipation … caught between the English imperialist and the black native."[117] In fact, the first interpreter and named speaking subject in the text, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us in "Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism," is Christophine, Antoinette's black nurse born in Martinique and given to Antoinette's mother as a wedding present.

Transplanted to Jamaica, Christophine is tangential to the main story in *Wide Sargasso Sea* even when she is given important scenes as when she stands up to Mr. Rochester's character on behalf of her mistress. Spivak has argued that "[Christophine] cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native."[118] Put differently, as much as Rhys's novel reexamines the character of Antoinette/Bertha, the structure of the book is not sufficiently subversive as to create the appropriate space for a multiple and diverse subject positioning. But how does the form of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which Spivak would not consider a postcolonial novel, differ from the way Gardner presents her white, black, and biracial characters in *White Skin, Black Kin: A Creole Conversation Piece*?

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[117] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn, 1985), 250.

[118] Ibid., 253.

To start, the white mistress and her three children in Gardner's installation are motionless, almost frozen in the two-channel video projection and five-channel sound installation. The same could be said about the master and the patrilineal ancestry of this family represented by portraits hung on the walls of the drawing room where the action takes places. The black female characters, on the other hand, come in and out of the scene through "ghosted movements," as Gardner has described. This installation has also been described as "a gathering of whispers and traces" with the black female characters drifting in and out of the frame and murmurs playing in a separate audio that can only be heard when pressing one's ear to the wall.[119]

White Skin, Black Kin: A Creole Conversation Piece purposefully points to the problem of structure in addressing the representation of black and white subjectivities. The mismatch between the visual and the aural indicates the slippages in reconstructing the complex histories of slavery. In the audio sequence, we get a glimpse of "white female complicity with the violence of slavery, white male violence towards black and white women, and collusion between white and black women in the face of white male violence."[120] The installation piece, as well as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, cannot avoid the pitfalls of colonial representation where the critique of the "Otherizing" of the black enslaved women or maids is embedded in the logic of the imperialist project. Indeed, Gardner's critique of the patriarchal structure of the colonizing enterprise is only effective by re-inscribing the black body (and for that matter, that of the white Creole women's body too) in the same setting, the same mise-en-scène, that she is purporting to

[119] Gabrielle Hezekiah, "Of Whispers and Traces in Joscelyn Gardner's *A Creole Conversation Piece*," in *White Skin, Black Kin: "Speaking the Unspeakable"* (St. Michaels, Barbados: The Barbados Museum & Historical Society, 2004), 15.

[120] Ibid, 16.

denounce.[121]

Gardner's work can also be accused of not being entirely faithful to history in her depiction of white women in the Caribbean. In places such as Barbados, where Gardner was born, the typology of slave ownership tells a very different story than the "victimhood" approach, which according to historian Hilary Beckles, has severe conceptual limitations. For instance, in his study "White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean," Beckles writes: "In Barbados in 1817, less than five of the holdings of 50 slaves or more were owned by white women, but they owned 40 percent of the properties with less than ten slaves. White women were 50 percent of the owners of slaves in Bridgetown, the capital, on properties stocked with less than 10 slaves. In general, 58 percent of slave owners in the capital were female, mostly, white, though some were also 'coloured' and black."[122] While Beckels's study was meant to discredit certain theories of the benevolence of white women in the Caribbean and in the south of the US, I think what his essay and the quote just cited make evident is the complicated network of relationships that women had to forge with each other under the umbrella of white male patriarchal authority. Gardner's oeuvre, however, only reflects on one side of the experience of slavery and does not delve into a more detailed history of the socio-economic role women played, depending on the color of their skin, in the enterprise of Caribbean enslavement.

Despite these limitations, *White Skin, Black Kin* does address a history of unequal oppression against womanhood and a preoccupation with what it means for her, as a white Caribbean artist, to identify with a place whose racialized structure tends to elide

[121] This argument is informed by Spivak's main point in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

[122] Beckels, "White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean," *History Workshop Journal* 36 (1993): 66-82.

other dynamics such as gender relations. And this brings me back to the first work discussed in this section: *Creole Portraits*. When Gardner says that she wants to "experiment with representing a shared Creole identity" what she is referring to is not the homogenization of women's experience in the context of Creole living. What she is setting out to do is carve a space where the stories of black and white women—together and not solely interpellated by the presence of the men in the Great House of the plantation—can begin to be articulated. In other words, the idea that these women might have had a relationship between them rooted, surely, on a patriarchal structure of society, but not exclusively defined by it, is "the shared Creole identity" that Gardner seeks to represent.

Bodies of women intertwined with the histories of other Caribbean women is what makes Gardner's work a site for a "shared Creole identity." *Creole Portraits* (I and II) work as an imagined archive that opens the door to questions about the relationships between women, questions that the non-existent photographic archive of slavery in the Caribbean cannot answer. Gardner's lithographs lead to the representation of creolization as an experiential relationship predicated on the bonds that transpired among women in the Caribbean.

2.3 Epidermalization, Race, and *Lederhosens* in Jean-Ulrick Désert's *Negerhosen2000*

The work by Jean-Ulrick Désert, *Negerhosen2000* (figure 26), was conceived after an incident where two German men verbally attacked and almost physically hurt Désert while walking in the neighborhood of Mitte in Berlin in 1996. After this experience, the artist had a traditional Bavarian *lederhosen* manufactured with white

skin-tone leather—as opposed to the traditional black or brown leather—and blond hair sewn onto the outfit. Once the tight and short costume was ready, Désert wore it and walked on the streets of Germany and other places in Europe with passersby asking to take pictures of him or with him, which they then mailed to the artist. After collecting the photographic record of his strolls through different European cities, Désert then turns these photos into beer-coasters, light boxes, limited editions of chromogenic prints, large photographic prints that he has exhibited at subways stations, and, in one of his most recent exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston, fictional postcards. In this chapter I analyze how the use of markers of purported racial singularity, such as the *lederhosen*, become, in Désert's performance, a vehicle for exploring one angle of creolization in the Caribbean.

Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Désert moved to New York when he was still in his formative years. Eventually, he received degrees in architecture from Cooper Union and Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. In the late 1990s he moved to Paris but, after "the discomfort of this [French colonial] history being all too present" which, "at times, restricted the work that [he] make[s]," he decided to move to Berlin.[123] Despite the lack of information about his decision to move to Germany, in a recent communication with the artist he shared with me the fact that his father—Jean Ulrick Désert (unhyphenated) and after whom he was named—had a German and French last name. He explained that, in his father's case, Ulrick (derived from the Germanic Ulrich) is not a middle name as it is in the artist's case. "Indeed there must be a German connection [that] I have not been able to successfully sleuth out," he

[123] Cathy Byrd, "Fresh Talk UNCUT: Jean-Ulrick Désert," Fresh Talk, October 27, 2012. http://www.prx.org/pieces/105298-fresh-talk-uncut-jean-ulrick-desert

explains.[124] This connection between Haiti, Germany, and the rest of the Caribbean, a rarely spoken about topic and least of all in art, is what I would like pursue in this section. Especially important to me is the way Désert utilizes the juxtaposition of two racial markers—his black skin and the *lederhosen*—to make a visual statement about the ownership of national tropes.

The German connection that Désert briefly mentions has roots in the town of Bombardopolis, on the northeastern side of Haiti. In fact, the immigration of German nationals to Haiti happened on three different waves: in 1764, when Louis XV announced that in order to augment the presence of European settlers in the island of Saint-Domingue he was taking the initiative of sending 2,470 Germans; the second wave, the one considered the most important for its commercial implications, happened during 1830 and 1840 when German merchants from Hamburg came to the island; and lastly, the third wave took place between 1938 and 1940 triggered by the rise of the Nazi party in Germany.[125] According to Joseph Bernard Jr. in his *Histoire de la Colonie Allemande d'Haïti*: "Tout au long du XXème siècle, la colonie allemande d'Haïti allait progressivement s'intégrer dans le commerce et la finance d'Haïti jusqu'à devenir à la fin de ce siècle l'une des colonies étrangères les plus influentes du pays."[126] Indeed, Germany's influence over Haiti's finances caused major international repercussions at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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[124] Jean-Ulrich Désert, e-mail message to author, March 27, 2014.

[125] Joseph Bernard Jr., *Histoire de la Colonie Allemande d'Haiti* (Port-au-Prince: L'imprimeur II, 2009), 13-20.

[126] Ibid., 20.

Before 1915, the US government was fearful of the increased German activity in Haiti. The official position of the US, according to the US Department of State Office of the Historian's webpage, maintains that:

> In the beginning of the 20th century German presence in Haiti increased as German merchants began establishing trading benches in Haiti, quickly dominating commercial business in the area. German men married Haitian women to get around laws denying foreigners land ownership and established roots in the Haitian community. The United States considered Germany its chief rival in the Caribbean, and feared German control of Haiti would give them a powerful advantage in the area.[127]

Along with the increased political instability that shrouded over Haiti prior to 1915, the Germans' sway over Haiti's economic affairs eventually led to the US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

This was not the only case of Central and Eastern European presence in Saint-Domingue or the portion of the island that would eventually become Haiti. In 1801, some five thousand Polish soldiers fought for the French in the Haitian Revolution.[128] In his book, *Poland's Caribbean Tragedy: A Study of Polish Legions in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802-1803*, Jan Pachoński describes that by 1803, "the French army had evacuated the western part of the island, leaving behind many Polish soldiers, some of whom had deserted to fight for the freedom of their black brothers against French invaders; others were simply prisoners of war. The descendants still inhabit a few remote enclaves in Haiti to this day."[129] It is important to point out that in the accounts by the US's Office of the Historian and Pachoński, miscegenation between Europeans and local

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[127] Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, http://history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/haiti

[128] Jan Pachoński, *Poland's Caribbean Tragedy: A Study of Polish Legions in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802-1803* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 1.

[129] Ibid., x.

Haitians is acknowledged as a strategy to expand control over a certain area or as a result of war.

In Désert's work, we see the coupling of two racial signifiers that are not all too common in either the visual culture of the Caribbean or Europe. The donning of *lederhosen* over his dark skin brings to mind, however, a prior example in the history of Western art. The *Portrait of Citizen Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies* (figure 27) made by Frenchman Anne-Louis Girodet in 1797, raises interesting questions about what it means for men of color to wear symbols strongly associated with the racial identity of European cultures. The Senegalese-born, Saint-Domingue freedman and abolitionist, Jean-Baptiste Belley appears in this late eighteenth-century portrait dressed in French military regalia. As one of three deputies invited to the French National Convention in 1794, Belley's portrait signals the visual embodiment of what was to be decreed three years later: the abolition, if not in practice at least in theory, of slavery in the French Empire.

This well-studied painting has been criticized for the binaries raised by the juxtaposition of a marble bust of Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (a French abolitionist who had only died the year before) and a less formal looking Belley. This painting, unique in its depiction of a military man of color and in fulfilling the conventions of artistic portraiture, is really two portraits in one. The robust, slightly taller and live-looking bust of Raynal contrasts with the slouching posture, small head, sloping profile and conspicuous penis of Belley. As many art historians have argued, Belley's pose is a recapitulation of *Capitoline Satyr*, a famous Roman copy of a statue by Praxiteles, which the audience contemporaneous with this painting would have interpreted as that of an

uncivilized being.[130] This is why, as Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby has expressed, in painting Belley's body, Girodet had to append "signs—above all the French uniform—to be recognized as free, as French, as deputy, and as officer."[131] In fact, Grigsby provides another example that shows how in order to assert racial equality the half-naked man of color had to align himself with the uniformed Frenchman (figure 28).[132] It is as if in that sideway embrace, in the proximity of both men and the display of each of their epidermalization, the eye were able to perform an optical trick by merging both bodies, both races, and proclaim the equal rights of men.

The same trope is perceived in a 1902 brand of chocolate from Switzerland sold in Germany (figure 29). The stamp used by the Swiss firm, Société Anonyme des Fabriques de Chocolate J. Klaus, employs the same visual vocabulary of presenting a white dressed figure with his arm placed protectively and paternalistically around the shoulders of an almost nude black, presumably, African man.[133] David Ciarlo, author of "Advertising and the Optics of Colonial Power at the Fin de Siècle," takes note of the difference between both figures when he writes: "The dress of each figure deserves particular attention. The white figure appears in alpinist shorts, with cap and boots. He is derivative of the Rüger cocoa firm's 1895 logo of a pudgy boy in hiking boots. The African figure, on the other hand, wears only a waist-wrap, adorned with some sort of

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[130] Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 35.

[131] Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 32.

[132] Ibid.

[133] David Ciarlo, "Advertising and the Optics of Colonial Power at the Fin de Siecle," in *German Colonialism, Visual Culture, and Modern Memory* ed. Volker M. Langbehn (New York: Routledge, 2010), 44.

shell necklace. His feet are bare."[134] Ciarlo reads this image as visual shorthand for the "civilizing mission of commerce." But analyzed from the standpoint of clothes as our second skin, we see that, whether a uniform or a pair of leather shorts, the racial identity of European countries is visually constructed through fashion *and* in juxtaposition to an inferior Other displayed in such a way as to only show his skin.

What happens at the level of discourse, however, when figures such as Jean-Baptiste Belley or Jean-Ulrick Désert transgress the boundaries set by the politics of public clothes and actually epidermilize both worlds? Let us look at one more example culled this time from popular culture. In 2011, Didier Drogba, the African soccer player from Ivory Coast who at the time was playing for Chelsea F.C., wore a *lederhosen* to an Oktoberfest event in Munich hosted by a fellow teammate. The visual narrative constructed by the photos of the paparazzi emphasized the sexual approximation to a white woman rather than the fact that he was at a Bavarian pub lending financial and moral support to his colleague at a fundraising event (figure 30). When seen next to Belley's portrait and Désert's *Negerhosen2000*, it becomes evident that the photograph of Drogba in *lederhosen* raises interesting questions about what it means to wear symbols strongly associated and constructed on the basis of racial singularity.

The term epidermalization was used by Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* as a way to understand the construction of racial visibility in the colonial context. With this term, Fanon refers to feelings of inferiority cultivated by the colonizing culture on the colonized body and anchored in appearance and epidermal differences.[135]

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[134] Ibid.

[135] Mikko Tuhkanen, *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 74.

Coincidentally, Fanon speaks about this epidermalization as a uniform of stereotypes or second skin that the black man must wear: "Willy-nilly, the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him."[136] In Jean-Ulrick Désert's case, he employs certain strategies to contravene the idea that a black man wearing a *lederhosen* is a visual incongruity. Désert pokes holes at the myth of nations built around the false premise of racial exclusivity by conspicuously walking around public arenas dressed in the traditional Bavarian outfit and posing for pictures which he then disseminates in the form of beer coasters, travel diaries, or enlarged posters in a subway station. Furthermore, in the exaggeration of some of his poses and the conspicuous lower angle of the camera, Désert pokes fun at the artistic conventions of portraiture, which are meant to bestow onto the sitter an air of grandiosity (figure 31). In another photograph (figure 32), Désert can be seen standing side-by-side to a woman carrying a baby in a way that harks back to the colonial trope of brazenly displaying the dichotomy of a half-dressed black man and a fully dressed white man except that, in his work, Désert has reversed the binary. Instead of epidermalizing the inferiority complex of which Fanon talks about in *Black Skin, White Masks*, I see Désert's *Negerhosen2000* as epidermalizing what the artist calls the "conspicuous invisibility"[137] of people of color living in a country whose national identity is strongly tied to a one-sided view of race.

In employing these visual strategies, Désert—just like Belley did more than two centuries before him with the uniform of the French republic—loads the traditional garbs with the signifier of race. This is a reminder of Germany's colonial history in Africa, but

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[136] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), 34.

[137] Cathy Byrd, "Fresh Talk UNCUT: Jean-Ulrick Désert," Fresh Talk, October 27, 2012. http://www.prx.org/pieces/105298-fresh-talk-uncut-jean-ulrick-desert

specifically the establishment of smaller outposts in Haiti and other parts of the Caribbean.[138] More important, the work also defamiliarizes Germany of any sense of racial exclusivity. Désert dressed in *lederhosen* undermines the colonial myth of racial purity and reminds us that the traditional gesture of the black man waiting to be garbed in European clothes can be transgressed as to cleverly reflect the myths, fears, and anxieties of former colonial powers.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to give a sample of the variegated ways in which Caribbean artists are choosing to represent the body in contemporary art. The three works analyzed defy the simple view that the Caribbean was a site of racial synthesis and that the product is readily and superficially summarized in the body. Instead, what Luciano, Gardner, and Désert set out to do—through deceptively simple strategies of artistic portraiture—is to confront racist or sexist traditions of representing the body by calling attention to the dynamics of subject positioning in the Caribbean. Effectively, the uneven and unexpected result of processes that, otherwise, insisted on homogenizing and regulating the Caribbean experience—what Glissant called creolization—is creatively depicted through the vehicle of the body in the three examples analyzed in this chapter.

In the case of Luciano's *Plátano Pride* from 2006, the artist borrows from academic portraiture the sharp frontal view and the unapologetic display of wealth. These common devices are used, however, to make a smart commentary that de-romanticizes any notions of a European descendant, agriculturally reliant, humble Puerto Rican. The

[138] A newly released documentary film—*German Town: The Lost Story of Seaford Town, Jamaica*—explores the history of German heritage in Seaford Town in Westmoreland Parish, Jamaica where Germans settled probably after the emancipation period.

pride derived from the *plátano* that hangs from the boy's neck is, quite literally, in the process of becoming empty of meaning. The rotting plantain will no longer be and, at the end, the only thing that will survive is the shallow platinum shell. The essence of Puerto Ricanness, of *criollidad*, that had endured for centuries in the figure of the *jíbaro* and in the saying *la mancha de plátano* is satirized in Luciano's *Plátano Pride*. For the sizable population of Puerto Ricans who live in New York, and arguably for the very urbanized youth growing up in many parts of the island, the connection to the romantic image of the *jíbaro* has been severed for some time know. Luciano has carefully constructed an image where the brown skin of the boy, as opposed to the symbol of the plantain, is not an accessory that, as writers did in the nineteenth century, can be manipulated and molded into one's political desires. Instead, it is there, highlighted by the pristineness of the white tee.

Similar to Luciano, in *Creole Portraits II: A Collection of Singular & Scarce Creole Portrait Heads to Perpetuate the Memory of the Women of Egypt Estate in Jamaica* (2007) Joscelyn Gardner shifts the way Creoleness is read in the body from depictions stemming from white, heteronormative desires to defiant (anti-) portraits centered on the bonds developed by women in the Caribbean. The stone lithographs of braided heads with objects of torture attached to the hairstyles calls attention to the sisterly and communal act of braiding hair yet it does not shy away from the context of violence in which the bonds between women of the same race or interracially might had developed during the period of slavery in the Caribbean. Seen as folios from scientific books, à la James Audubon, the prints must be understood as a creative effort to build an archive where the central narrative is not the sexual abuses committed by Thomas

Thistlewood and documented in his diary—incidentally, this is the only record of the existence of the women depicted by Gardner. Instead, the artist turns to the beautiful artistry of braiding hair to give individual markers of identity to the women who live in Egypt Estate, Jamaica. By using the word Creole in the title of this work, Gardner implies that the intrinsic violence of a male-dominated patriarchal society during the slavery period in the Caribbean was directed, albeit unequally, to all women living under this system.

Jean-Ulrich Désert, on the other hand, opts for a more humorous approach in the way he tackles racial assumptions about the Caribbean and, in turn, of European nations in his *Negerhosen2000*. By wearing a *lederhosen*, made of fair hide, against his dark flesh and deliberately strutting around the streets of Berlin and other cities in Europe, Désert challenges the stereotypical divide of representing white men in uniform or some other type of recognizable livery and half-naked black men. The layering, so to speak, of his skin and the added epidermalization of the *lederhosen* transgresses any pre-supposed meaning of the signifiers of blackness and of whiteness (implied in the *lederhosen*). With the use of camera and the way he disseminates—through very public channels such as postcards, beer coasters, and subway posters—the photographs taken for *Negerhosen2000*, Désert gives immediate visibility to terms such as Afro-German and to the centenary history of racial miscegenation between Germans and people from Africa or African descent as was the case in Haiti, where the artist was born.

What all three artists successfully accomplish in their works is the way in which they use the language of portraiture to make a commentary about the display of Caribbean bodies and to confront racial assumptions about those bodies. While race is

certainly an element at the center of the artistic rendering of the three works discussed in this chapter, it is more important to examine the role race plays in determining the different subject positions in the Caribbean. Thus, what is at stake here is the notion of Creole subjects grappling with stereotypic conventions of representation and articulating that defiance through the artistic means of portraiture.

Chapter Three

Creole Semiotics:
Toward a Theory of Sign-making in the Visual Arts of the Caribbean

Creole can be a verb more than a noun,
describing an action or process more than a fixed subject.
-Christopher Cozier

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze how meaning is constructed in contemporary Caribbean art and to put this theory to test by examining a series of examples found in the region's visual culture. Consider the following example: In 2008 Trinidadian artist Christopher Cozier took a photograph of a pair of children's flip-flops in Port-au-Prince, Haiti (figure 33), and published it on his blog, *Visual Matters*. Along with the photograph, Cozier included a note that I quote here in length:

> On my last visit, I just could not take pictures. I had to ask a colleague (Karole Gizolme) to take this image for me. I noticed the shoes on the ground near to where I was sitting. Something about the way that the shoes had become so worn out struck me. I kept thinking that no one growing child could have worn that shoe long enough for it to become so worn down. The shoes were just on the ground in a yard in the Capital. They looked like islands in the sea but also like the two countries that make one island facing off.[139]

I am interested in this photograph and its quote because it makes evident the semiotic possibilities of, in this case, sandals at both the discursive and aesthetic level. The flip-flops, as visually and verbally depicted by Cozier, represent in their materiality the living conditions of a child in Haiti. As visual tropes, they stand as the severed island of Hispaniola. Following Cozier's description, it could be argued that the worn-out features of the flip-flops give way to a metaphoric sense by which the sandals become Haiti and

[139] Christopher Cozier, "Child's Shoes, Haiti," *Visual Matters*, http://christophercozier.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2008-01-01T00:00:00-04:00&updated-max=2009-01-01T00:00:00-04:00&max-results=5

the Dominican Republic, now two islands in themselves. Along with maps, boats, flags, and the sea, sandals represent not only an icon that conditions movement but also one that epitomizes the ways in which contemporary Caribbean artists are translating social, cultural, and political experiences into art. This chapter deals mainly with the ways scholars have analyzed the construction of meaning and my own proposal of a semiotic model that will lead us to a better understanding of a body of contemporary artworks done by artists from the pan-Caribbean region. The last part of the chapter puts into practice the Creole semiotics model by looking at a series of icons that build upon poststructuralist semiotics.

Cozier's photograph of a found object has prompted me to ponder about creolization as a semiotic model. In other words, is it possible to derive a theory of sign-making from the various elements that constitute creolization in the Caribbean? For instance, what about the heterogeneous sources that make up the Caribbean is reflected in the arts from the region? If indigenization (or, becoming native) is one of the most salient aspects of creolization, how is this seen in the arts? In this chapter, I want to test how theories of linguistic and cultural creolization can be used to explain Cozier's work—from its physical construction to its thematic implications—and how we can apply this model to further examine visual and artistic responses by Creole societies to processes of creolization. The overarching argument of this thesis being that in contemporary Caribbean art history, there is a robust body of installations and mixed media works whose construction and subject matter echoes the cross-fertilization process that make up creolization. By analyzing the visual economies of creolization, I aim to call attention to

the ways in which Caribbean art can add to studies of iconography, iconology, and semiotic analysis.

The first half of this chapter will be devoted to revising the theories of meaning-making in regard to art. As a product of the discipline of art history, this essay will touch on German art historian Erwin Panofsky's studies of how images mean—a study he called iconography and iconology that aimed at identifying, describing, and interpreting the content of images. Panofsky's ideas will serve as a basic point of departure from where one can begin to understand how the literal, metaphoric, and social meanings are deduced from a work of art. From here, I will go into other fields of knowledge that have taught us how to discern meaning from the analysis of the structures of language—understood loosely as a complex system of communication of which art is but one example. Semiotics, specifically, studies the factors involved in the permanent process of sign-making and interpreting and the development of conceptual tools for grasping that process as it happens in different arenas of cultural activity.[140] I will briefly go over the general tenets of structuralist semiotics, as espoused by French theorist Ferdinand de Saussure, before focusing on the ways poststructuralist semioticians have presented counter-examples that are better suited for the understanding of contemporary Caribbean art. From this last group, I will look closely at the theories brought forth by Charles Sanders Peirce and Jacques Derrida. Additionally, I will discuss the term "floating signifier"—as first proposed by Claude Levis-Strauss and taken on later by Stuart Hall—and explain how it relates to examples of Caribbean art.

[140] Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (June 1991): 174.

For the second part of this chapter, I will look at theories of linguistic creolization to see how the structures of language in Creole cultures mirror theories of cultural creolization. As explained in the previous chapter, studies of creolization are often polarized into two camps—linguistic and cultural—that look at each other rather infrequently. It is my purpose in this chapter, to see how cultural and linguistic creolization can work together as a way of explaining the structures of meaning in Caribbean art. I believe a consideration of both these responses to the phenomenon of creolization in regions like the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean can contribute to the theorizing of a Creole semiotic model aimed to serve as a new interpretative model for the reading of Caribbean art.

3.1 Bastardizing Iconography

As a student of art history, I want this dissertation to contend with some of the fundamental principles at the base of my academic field. I must admit that one of the motivations to bring Erwin Panofsky's studies of iconography from the vaults of art history and into the discussion of contemporary Caribbean art is to claim some type of (meaningless) legitimacy to the arts of the region. However, the main reason I want to apply these codes is to demonstrate the process of how images mean and what the implications are for thinking about this in relation to artworks that fall outside the conventional geographic scope of art history. It is not with a blind eye that I propose to look at Panofsky's interpretative model. I understand the implicit faults in his paradigm: his theories are too ambitious, promising a science of images as opposed to an encounter

(think again of Cozier's photograph and his quote) between image and word;[141] his model seeks to homogenize the interpretations of artworks; and, assumes there is a common culture shared between the art object and the historian. This last point is a particularly difficult task for the art historian of the Caribbean for, as Cuban art critic José Manuel Noceda Fernández has argued, the asynchronicity of political and cultural events prompted very unequal art worlds to develop across the Caribbean.[142]

Still, in order to understand the basics of iconography in art and its somewhat thorny relationship to semiotics we must begin by turning our attention to Panofsky. Standing at the pinnacle of the annals of Western art history as the person who sought to give more depth to the process of signification in the visual arts, Panofsky developed a model that would give more sophistication to our understandings of objects we apprehend on a daily basis, especially to art. Panofsky's area of research included, among many other topics, a comparison between architectural (Gothic) structures and a European order of thought (Scholasticism).[143] I find this particular topic, broadly speaking, not unlike mine, where I seek to understand the connections between contemporary Caribbean art and Caribbean theories of creolization. The differences between the two projects are obvious, however. While Panofsky attempts to illustrate this parallelism through historical evidence (i.e., documents recording architects' intentional use of Scholastic

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[141] For more on the fundamental problems of Panofsky's model of iconography and iconology and a revision of these theories, see W.J.T. Mitchell, "Iconology, Ideology, and Cultural Encounter: Panofsky, Althusser, and the Scene of Recognition," in *Reframing Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 292-300.

[142] "Islands in the Sun: Caribbean Art in the 1990s," in *Curating in the Caribbean*, edited by David A. Bailey, et. al. (Berlin: The Greenbox, 2012), 21.

[143] Panofsky published his findings in the eponymous book *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (Latrobe, PA: The Archabbey Press, 1951).

reasoning), I prefer to open up the possibilities of interpreting the ways we "see" creolization in Caribbean art through metaphors and other figures of speech, in addition to primary and secondary sources. Yet, at the base of both projects is an interest in extrapolating iconography to broader systems of thought.

In his book *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Panofsky devised a three-tiered model for the interpretation of art. Two of his operative terms—iconography and iconology—corresponded to the second and third levels of interpretation, both occurring after what Panofsky referred to as a pre-iconographical level of description. The pre-iconographic phase was achieved once visual data was recognized as having an equivalent in the world of experience.[144] In order for the image to be intelligible to the observer, a second more complex process of comprehension had to occur. Iconography—the second tier in Panofsky's model—required the decoding of images within the spectrum of artistic meaning.[145] Decoding intelligible images or motifs meant that most onlookers with a shared cultural background could deduce and come to agree on a conventional message. To describe this process Panofsky used the example of a man tipping his hat. According to Panofsky, the foundation for an accurate iconographic interpretation would be the understanding of the sensible data; that is, the act of a man tipping his hat. An iconographic analysis of this act would imply pairing together "man tipping his hat" with "greeting." Recognition of this kind of greeting would necessitate specific knowledge of the cultural and historical

[144] Christine Hasenmuller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36, no. 3 (Spring, 1978): 292.

[145] Ibid.

(con)text of the decorous male ritual of slightly inclining the body at the same time that the hat is ever-so-briefly removed from the head.

The development of Panofsky's concepts of iconography and iconology were specifically applied to examples from European art trenchantly seeded in the classical canon of the humanities. Therefore, when Panofsky said that in order to understand the iconography of a work of art the viewer had to be a learned person in the literary tradition at the base of Western civilization what he meant is that images or motifs in art had to have a thematic or conceptual equivalent in key literary sources. A deeper level of interpretation called iconology suggested that a symbolic meaning is true to all art objects. In other words, a study of the iconology of a work of art will give insight into the cultural attitudes that produce its meaning. In Panofsky's own terms, he defined iconology as "ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed in one work."[146] Whether iconology is the result of a conscious or unconscious qualification by one or more people, what remains true is that iconology is more invested in subjective interpretation. This leaves iconography as the articulation of themes and concepts into visual images. Put differently, iconography helps us make sense of artistic information by relating the image with its meaning. My desire to delve into the iconography and iconology of Caribbean artworks stems not only from the fact that no art historian or any other academic, for that matter, has ever asked what some of the motifs that would come out of an iconographic study are, but also how an analysis of Caribbean iconography would enrich theories of creolization.

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[146] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), 7.

At this point, one must acknowledge the evident parallels between Panofsky's ideas—the goals and methods of iconography—and the relationship between signifier and signified, as described in structuralist semiotics. But first, attention must be paid to those voices that have expressed caution at facile co-optations of iconography by a "semiotics of art."

3.2 "Semiotics and traditional art history are reluctant bedfellows"[147]

For the past almost half-century, scholars invested in analyzing the transmission and reception of visual meaning have seen if not the analogies at least a resemblance between Panofsky's contributions to the field of visual studies and structuralist theories of language. Among such theories, semiotics stands as the study of "the factors involved in this permanent process of sign-making and interpreting and the development of conceptual tools for grasping that process as it happens in different arenas of cultural activity," according to professors Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal's excellent essay titled "Semiotics and Art History."[148] The main difference between iconography and semiotics has to do with the passive or active role in apprehending the meaning of the work of art. In iconography, some have said, the viewer stands before the painting, for example, and has to reach into it in order to extract the meaning that the work poses and declares.[149] Iconography presupposes that the viewer is an objective one, equipped only with the tools

[147] Stephanie John Sage, "Eliminating the Distance: From Barthes' Écriture-Lecture to Écriture-Vue," in *Cultural Semiosis: Tracing the Signifier*, ed. Hugh Silverman (New York & London: Routledge, 1998), 105.

[148] Bryson and Bal, "Semiotics and Art History," 174.

[149] Sage, "Eliminating the Distance," 106; and, Hubert Damisch, "Semiotics and Iconography," in *The Art of Art History*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 236.

that will enable the disclosure of what the artwork wants to say. Prevalence is given to the visual and formal aspects, and any association to verbal modes is seen as a disservice to the to the art object.[150] Because of its roots in linguistics, the field of art history has been skeptical of semiotics' interest in analyzing language (including visual language) according to the units that constitute it. Somehow, the art historian believes, iconography is in a separate realm and does not require interpretation the way a text does. However, despite art history's tendentious efforts to draw a line between the transmission and reception of visual meaning and the ways in which language is apprehended, it is apparent that semiotics shares a common ground with iconography.

In her essay "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," Christine Hasenmueller raises the point that the exercise of adapting "semiological concepts and methods to painting" is faced with the limitation of semiology's "long association of its conceptual language with linguistic and literary material."[151] Hasenmueller's take is slightly different from the more common criticism that claims that it has been art history's inability to renew its methods from fear of "contamination by verbal models, whether linguistic or psychoanalytic" what had prevented the realization of a semiotics of art.[152] In fact, three years before Hasenmueller published her article, Hubert Damisch was making note of the paradox that while art history has never ceased to adhere to the logo-centric model, which it claims to denounce, semiotics on the other hand was taking note of the image in its articulation of the sign.[153] Thus, when Hasenmueller defined iconography as "the analysis

[150] Ibid., 106.

[151] Hasenmuller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," 290.

[152] Damisch, "Semiotics and Iconography," 236.

[153] Ibid.

of systematic associations of motif and literary content," and Damisch declared that semiotics' intent on "stripping down the mechanism of signifying" what the two scholars were agreeing on was that: 1) the work of art is ripe with meaning and 2) in order to understand that meaning, which it may seem automatic in some cases, is to accept that a process of signification happens in the mind of the beholder.

The intersection of Panofsky's ideas with the structuralist and poststructuralist theories of signs—also called semiotics—has given way to a "semiotics of art": a method for studying artworks as a systemic relationships of signifiers and signifieds that together, as signs, can transmit meaning. In semiotics, the basic unit is the sign whose form is infused with socially constituted meaning. The way to decode this meaning is by analyzing the bond between the two parts of the sign—the signifier and the signified—and to see how this relationship has come to be culturally framed and constructed. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure popularized a dyadic model that explained the arbitrary link between signifier and signified. In its simplest form, Saussure's dyad was made of a signifier that described the form the sign takes and a signified or concept to which the signifier refers. The novelty in Saussure's model laid in the analysis of the inner workings of language as seen on its own and isolated from historical considerations. What he arrived at was the realization that a sign is an arbitrary code, that there is nothing natural between, say, the signifier "tree" and the signified of a woody elongated plant.

Saussure's shortcoming, and the reason why this chapter will pay more attention first to Charles Sanders Peirce and then to poststructuralist semiotics, lies in his interest in the structure of the sign and not in the process of signification. Or, as Alex Potts has described in his essay "Sign," "With later poststructuralist theory, the notion of a fixed

signified correlated on a one-to-one basis with a signifier is abandoned and meaning becomes instead the unstable effect of a never-ending process of signification."[154] A less static model, as the one put forth by the American logician Charles Sanders Peirce and later Jacques Derrida, allows for a process of signification that can be applied to an analysis of the multimedia works of Caribbean artists, and which in turn presents parallels with theories of linguistic and cultural creolization.

At times, Peirce's writings can seem too cumbersome for the untrained; however, his basic structure of the sign is accessible enough to have far reaching possibilities in its application into other fields outside philosophy. The tripartite system that Peirce called semiosis, involved the production and interpretation of signs as it unfolds through three signposts, namely: the representamen, the interpretant, and the object. Much like Saussure's signifier, the representamen corresponds to something that stands for the sign but that could be better explained if we called it the sign-vehicle, for not every aspect of what can be considered a sign is relevant in it being interpreted as such.[155] In other words, by calling the signifier a sign-vehicle we are doing two things: we are establishing from the onset that a quality of signs is that of movement (migratory, itinerant), one that enables a dynamic signifying process, and we are also specifying what about that sign

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[154] Alex Potts, "Sign," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 22.

[155] To better understand the representamen or ground, as Peirce also called it, an example could be useful. In order to explain the sign "refined to those elements most crucial to its functioning as a signifier," consider the example of a molehill given by Albert Atkin: "Not every characteristic of the molehill plays a part in the signifying presence of moles. The color of the molehill plays a secondary role since it will vary according to the soil from which it is composed. Similarly, the sizes of molehills vary according to the size of the mole that makes them, so again, this feature is not primary in the molehill's ability to signify. What is central here is the casual connection that exists between the type of mound in my lawn and moles: since moles make molehills, molehills signify moles. Consequently, primary to the molehill's ability to signify the mole is the brute physical connection between it and a mole." Atkin, "Peirce's Theory of Signs," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2010 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/peirce-semiotics/

interests us in our quest for meaning. Because this sign-vehicle addresses somebody (it has to be thought by a person), that idea conjured up in the mind of someone (a more developed idea of the representamen) is called an interpretant. Not to be confused with an interpret*er*, rather the interpret*ant* is a mental image/thought evoked in an individual's mind that points back to what Peirce called the object, or third leg in his model. Bryson and Bal have succinctly explained Peirce's model through the example that follows:

> When one sees a painting, say a still-life of a fruit bowl, the image is, among other things, a sign or representamen of something else. The viewer shapes in her or his mind an image of that something with which she or he associates this image. That mental image…is the interpretant. This interpretant points to an object. The object is different for each viewer: it can be real fruit for one, other still-life paintings for another, a huge amount of money for a third, "seventeenth-century Dutch" for a fourth, and so on. The object for which the painting stands is therefore fundamentally subjective and reception-determined.[156]

With his model, what Peirce gave way to was the possibility of an "unlimited semiosis." In other words and continuing with the example presented above, any of the objects mentioned can turn into a signifier thus making any signified infinitely commutable.[157]

Put succinctly, the main difference between Peirce's and Sausurre's theories happened at the level of the structure. Whereas Sausurre's is an enclosed dichotomous model, Peirce's is seemingly triadic if it were not for the fact that Peirce allowed for the interpretant to act not only as the sense we make of a sign, but also as a sign in itself. The possibilities for a chain of signs, and the resulting processes of decoding that could accompany any of the signs, make Peirce's semiosis more directly linked to theories of linguistic creolization.

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[156] Bryson and Bal, "Semiotics and Art History," 188.

[157] Daniel Chandler, "Modality and Representation," Semiotics for Beginners, last modified July 3, 2014, http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem02a.html

3.3 The How of Meaning, or Ways to Trace a Signifier Across the Caribbean

In this next section I would like to go back to the photograph taken by Christopher Cozier mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. How can we apply Peirce's teachings on semiotics to the photograph of these two flip-flops? In this particular case, by reading the long caption once again we get a glimpse at the signifying process that occurred in Cozier's mind and that continues in mine (and by extension, you, the reader).

> On my last visit, I just could not take pictures. I had to ask a colleague (Karole Gizolme) to take this image for me. I noticed the shoes on the ground near to where I was sitting. Something about the way that the shoes had become so worn out struck me. I kept thinking that no one growing child could have worn that shoe long enough for it to become so worn down. The shoes were just on the ground in a yard in the Capital. They looked like islands in the sea but also like the two countries that make one island facing off.[158]

In this quote, we can distinguish the structures of the sign: the two worn-out sandals found in Haiti (the sign-vehicle or representamen), islands in the sea (the interpretant), and, the island of Hispaniola (the object). How the process of signification comes alive is evident if we dissect and analyze Cozier's description in relation to the elements in the photo. As Peirce would warn us, not everything about this pair of sandals is relevant for it to be, ultimately, seen as a sign for the Caribbean island of Hispaniola; however, the worn out surface, the fact that they were found in Haiti, and the proximity and positioning of one flip-flop opposite the other led Cozier to indicate that the sandals look like "the two countries that make one island facing off." Although he does not say it directly, the object that this reference alludes to leads me to think of the tense relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Although to someone else the object could

[158] Christopher Cozier, "Child's Shoes, Haiti," *Visual Matters*, http://christophercozier.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2008-01-01T00:00:00-04:00&updated-max=2009-01-01T00:00:00-04:00&max-results=5

have been the island shared by Saint-Martin and Sint Maarten, a child walking barefoot, or the photograph itself.

Peirce went into excruciating detail in his classification of the many different types of signs; after his initial tripartite typology, Peirce then multiplied it until he ended up with ten classes of signs, then sixty-six, and finally sixty thousand.[159] But, for purposes of this chapter, suffice it to say that this photographic blog entry, titled "Child's Shoes, Haiti," would represent an *iconic sign* because it evokes an object based on its likeness. In Peirce's own words, he declared: "But a sign may be *iconic*, that is, may represent its object mainly by its similarity, no matter what its mode of being."[160] Thus, the sandals in this photograph are iconic of islands (see a satellite image of Hispaniola, figure 34) based on: the horizontal direction and rectangular shape of both sandals; the space the two of them occupy in proportion to the background; the deep blue hue of the sandals, inverted in the satellite image; and, the interrupted and irregular surface of the second plane. Therefore, when Cozier writes, "they look likes islands" it is an iconic mode of reading that he is applying to the sight, and then to the photograph, of these sandals. While the iconicity between the sandals (or representamen) and the island of Hispaniola (or object) is not predicated upon an exact physical likeness between the two it does, however, operate at a metaphoric/symbolic level. When Cozier declares that the sandals remind him of "the two countries that make one island facing off" he is drawing

[159] Jack Child, "The Politics and Semiotics of the Smallest Icons of Popular Culture: Latin American Postage Stamps," *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 1 (February, 1995): 113.

[160] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Innis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 10.

from a long chain of associations. As in Panofsky's iconology, the geographic as well as cultural and historical context helps in the interpretation of the photograph.[161]

But, what if we questioned the sign status of this photograph of two sandals found in the streets of Port-au-Prince? To be clear, what I challenge is not the communicative ability of the flip-flops but the fixity of the flip-flops as a contained sign. Hence, to paraphrase the question, what if the photograph does not yield one unique signified? French philosopher Jaques Derrida raised this problematic when he observed:

> This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse-provided we can agree on this word-that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*.[162]

Other philosophers have interpreted the lack of an unspecified signified as having an "empty" or "floating" signifier. I see differences between these two precisely because, as signs in and of themselves, they cannot escape the process of signification. Put differently, while an empty signifier means the lack of an agreed upon basic signified necessary to initiate the "freeplay" that Derrida spoke about, a floating signifier may have a concrete word but the concepts and ideas that derive from it are all but stable.[163] It may

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[161] The fact that he took the photograph in Haiti most likely played a role in his interpretation of the sandals. Had he seen these sandals in his native island of Trinidad, perhaps he would have not taken the photograph or, if he had, his caption would have been very different seeing how Trinidad and Tobago—one country, two separate islands—is the opposite of the Dominican Republic and Haiti—one island, two countries.

[162] Jaques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," The Hydra @ UCI, last modified February 19, 2009, http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/sign-play.html

[163] Perhaps the best example of a floating signifier is that of race. Stuart Hall best described it in this way: "The meaning of a signifier can never be finally or trans-historically fixed. That is, it is always, or there is always, a certain sliding of meaning, always a margin not yet encapsulated in language and meaning, always something about race left unsaid, always someone a constitutive outside, who's very existence the identity of race depends on, and which is absolutely destined to return from its expelled and objected

seem like a small distinction but a necessary one, I believe, in order to discuss its relatedness to creolization.

When Derrida spoke of "freeplay" between signifiers he meant that they are not fixed to their signifieds but point beyond themselves to other signifiers in an "indefinite referral of signifier to signified."[164] Derrida called this endless deferral of meaning "*différance.*" The term *différance* implies the possibility of, first, defining a concept not because of an inherent relationship between that word and its definition but through the way it differs from other related concepts. Second, because meaning will always be deferred to other adjacent terms—other nouns, verbs, adjectives—then the arrival at a definite definition will always already be postponed. Those opposite words that are implicit in every term as well as the other meanings that are constantly deferred, Derrida described with the concept of the "trace." The trace is, thus, that chain of signifiers and signifieds that trails behind a sign. As signifiers at the mercy of analysis, *différance* and trace evoke in my mind a visual analogy found in the art of the Caribbean.

Tony Capellán's installation *Mar Caribe*, from 1996 (figure 35), was not so much conceived in the Dominican Republic as it was found in its shores. Made from salvaged flip-flops found floating near the eastern coast of Hispaniola and re-assembled using barbed wire, the installation pays tribute to the pain suffered by many Dominicans and Haitians who attempt to reach the shores of Puerto Rico in search of a better life. The flip-flops are painted in an eye-catching blue that resembles the bluish-green color of the Caribbean Sea. However calm and soothing these colors may be, the effect is

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position outside the signifying field to trouble the dreams of those who are comfortable inside." Stuart Hall, "Race, The Floating Signifier," Goldsmith College, London, 1997. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BI-CwR8pCcY (Minute 8.06-8.52).

[164] Daniel Chandler, "Modality and Representation," Semiotics for Beginners, last modified July 3, 2014, http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem02a.html

immediately interrupted by the unexpected presence of barbed wire used in lieu of the rubber straps that typically hold the feet to the sandal. The use of this material piques the attention of the viewer because it does not represent the innocuous material (rubber) that one has come to expect. Wire, though, has a different set of associations. When put around a house, barbed wire is meant to prevent and potentially harm trespassers; but at the same time, it protects the citizens of a house or of a determined place. In the case of *Mar Caribe*, the wire used in the installation neither represents a harmful barrier nor is it a safe railing; it is, rather, the residue of both. The flip-flop is the remains of an unsuccessful attempt at fleeing the island and the island's drawing back of its denizens.

In Capellán's installation, the conflation of shoes and water poetically express the phrase "to walk on water." This expression matches the messianic tone in the word "salvaged" flip-flops. The ghostly sight of unfilled sandals walking on top of water but never quite reaching a desired end is perhaps Capellán's way of salvaging the memory of those who perished in the sea. The process of art making and the process of mourning are one and the same. The wake left by the once-moving bodies now stands as the wake held to remember the loss. The meaning of the word "wake" is here in constant negotiation, in constant motion—always deferred—swaying continuously at a wave-like pace.

To those who died in the open sea—particularly the Spanish-speaking Dominicans who every year die crossing the Mona Passage that separates their country from Puerto Rico—the wake to which I have been referring would be translated as "*estela*." The word *estela* carries in Spanish two meanings just as in English, with the slight difference that, even though it means the track left by a moving body, it does not mean to stand watch over a deceased body. Instead, *estela* carries a second meaning. It is

a monument that rises over the ground as a sort of headstone. The translation or, better yet, the juxtaposition of these two words—wake and *estela*—and their meanings render a new and un-simplified dimension to Capellán's work. *Mar Caribe* can be seen as a surrogate tombstone for those who passed away in the sea.

A closer look at *Mar Caribe* will expose the trace of the wake in the edges of the overlapping flip-flops. Nevertheless, the trace of the short waves is not the trace of the absent bodies. It points us to comprehend the absence but it does not replace the presence of the people who died in shipwrecks in the Caribbean Sea. One can follow the trace left by the sandals as if it were a procession following the wake of a deceased person. But still, this does not re-present the Dominicans, and also Haitians, who have died. In its place we are left with the trace of footsteps and salvaged sandals that memorialize those who are now absent.

The itinerant character of icons such as flip-flops resonates with poststructuralist theories on semiotics. Derrida's lessons about *différance* and the trace agree with the process of visual creolization that I see at play in the Caribbean. In the sections that follow, I intend to dissect other art examples in order to see them at their elemental level; that is, as icons or visual representations that have acquired a certain level of recognition due to their popularity in the visual arts of the region. Each icon, however, cannot be analyzed in isolation, away from the other icons that follow in the wake of the signifying chain. In turn, this chain of visual signifiers is contained within the artistic matrix of the Caribbean, which is itself (and this does not elude me) a floating signifier. The fluidity and dynamism of this methodology finds a parallel in the process of creolization whereby contact between cultures leads to new and unpredictable cultural phenomena such as

Creole languages. In Creole linguistics, specifically, creolization has been defined as the process by which a new language is born from the confluence of several parent languages yet the grammar and other rules differ from those original idioms. Therefore, just like poststructuralist semiotics does not aim for the process of signification to be fixed or completed, creolization also rejects synthesis and instead describes an action that is marked by fragmentation and itinerancy.

3.4 Islands in the Stream and Boats that Sail Away

Given the stronghold of Creole linguistics in the Caribbean, I have pondered about the parallels that one could draw between the elements of language and Caribbean art. If we accept that Caribbean art is a visual language and we look at some of the common elements across the different linguistic clusters of the Caribbean, similarities with the process of sign making start to arise. Much like words in a sentence, I propose, islands are signs that stand individually but together act syntactically. Put more firmly, the iconicity of the islands has been a vehicle for Caribbean artists to establish the region or the countries from where they hail as emblems of artistic practice.

The morphology of the islands of the Caribbean has been a popular trope in contemporary art. In the field of linguistics, morphology refers to the study and description of how words are formed in language. Understood more loosely, however, this concept can be useful in thinking of the form and structure of the Caribbean as a whole but also at the level of individual islands. Its geographic location has made the region a repository of many a "tropical paradise" fantasies and imaginings. The discursive formations of the Caribbean as a playground or backyard of some other

country's more adult version of statehood has been a topic of contention for many Caribbean artists.

In Annalee Davis's *Just Beyond My Imagination* (figure 36) from 2007 and presented in the 10th Havana Biennial in 2009, the Barbadian artist represented the Caribbean archipelago as a golf course installation. The space normally occupied by the Caribbean Sea has been replaced with artificial turf, and sand traps make up the shapes of most of the Greater and Lesser Antilles. Other elements that make up this installation include three walls painted in a shade of blue reminiscent of a cloudless sky, a flagstick in the far left side that reads "Just Beyond My Imagination," and a plaque announcing "members preferred." As Davis explains on her website, the title was taken from a marketing slogan used by the Barbados Board of Tourism when the small country hosted the Golf World Cup Championships in December 2006. The tournament was broadcasted globally through the ESPN television network, which showed the 21 by 14-mile island transformed into an international golfing center.

Davis's map of the Caribbean is incomplete, however. Only the eastern half of Hispaniola—the Dominican Republic—is represented in this map. The absence of Haiti raises interesting questions regarding the participation or exclusion of some islands in the discourse of the Caribbean as playground. For those countries that are represented, though, the components that make up this golf course allude to the many hotel resorts that have become the staple of the tourism industry and all the tropes that have constructed the image of the Caribbean as a place where pleasure, leisure, and hedonism are at the disposal of the tourist who comes to the islands but not for the people who live in them.

The lush greenery of the turf has an Edenic quality to it that is not accidental.[165] Rather, the untouched and uninterrupted piece of land reminds viewers of the packaging, for lack of a better word, of the Caribbean through engravings and postcards.[166]

Fascination with the outlines of the islands has become a way for Caribbean artists to reflect on the appeal of tourism but also on the insularity that comes with being isolated from a larger geographic formation. A case in point is the *Matrices* (Matrixes, figure 37) series by Martinican artist Hervé Beuze from 2007. For this series, Beuze utilized the irregular shape of the island as a template of sorts, which he then fills in with different man-made found materials. The final product results in mixed media sculptures or installations that vary in size but with the one characteristic in common that all of them examine one aspect vis-à-vis the shape of Martinique.

With an installation such as *Machinique* (part of the series *Matrices*, figure 38), the identification with the island does not happen only at a visual level but at textual level as well. The close proximity between the title and the written and verbal forms of the word Martinique trigger a double enunciation of the country. Other elements in this composition reveal the chain of signifiers and signifieds that link the French word, *machinique* (mechanical), and the name of the island, Martinique. *Machinique* is a site

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[165] A quick Google search for the phrase "Caribbean playground" currently yields 1,830,000 entries; the top results being a Putumayo CD titled *Caribbean Playground* and news about sailing and cruises. Despite the ubiquity of this stereotype, scholars, particularly anthropologists, have studied this attitude toward the Caribbean and have published their analyses in books such as Mimi Sheller's *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003); David Timothy Duvall's *Tourism in the Caribbean: Trends, Developments, Prospects* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004); and Sandra Courtman's *Beyond the Blood, the Beach, and the Banana: New Perspectives in Caribbean Studies* (Kingston & Miami: Ian Randle, 2004).

[166] In her essay "Countercolonial Landscapes," as well as in the larger scope of her book *Sowing Empire*, Jill H. Casid studies not only the imperial politics of gardening in historical documents that include paintings and engravings but also the inherent potential in these for countercolonial strategies of representation. *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnessota Press, 2005), 191-236.

specific installation made for the Fondation Clément, a former sugar mill plantation and distillery, in Le Françõis, Martinique. Measuring 16 feet long by 6 ½ feet wide, the contours of the islands are filled with the residue of the sugarcane plant after the stalks have been crushed to extract the juice, a fibrous material also called bagasse. Beuze has mentioned that inside the factory, the installation has no choice but to face the elements that lay around it that speak to a history of overdependence on sugar and on enslaved labor.

Laid out on the floor, the cartography of *Machinique* is not one that carefully merges with the ground or surface where it rests. Instead, this map's borders are clearly contained by a 6-inch brass structure that immediately recalls the industrial complex where the work is housed. Writing about this work, art critic Sophie Ravion D'Ingianni has commented: "With *Machinique*, the artist wisely highlights—by a voluntary set of analogies and formal shifts—that the architecture is not the innocent handling of a form of spatiality. In this way, in 'the traces' of a sugar heritage—understood in the industrial sense as well—the principle of a plant-based installation created by Hervé presents a spatial framework that includes the immediate vicinity of the social reality of the Plantation."[167] In this way, Beuze seeks to make an analysis of Martinique through a one-to-one correlation between the outline of the island and the objects contained in it. The relationship is symbolic, of course, meant to speak of a deeply imbued reality—imagined or imposed—of the island of Martinique.

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[167] "Avec *Machinique*, l'artiste signale judicieusement - par un jeu volontaire d'analogies et de décalages formels - que l'architecture n'est pas la manipulation innocente d'une forme de spatialité. De la sorte, dans *'les traces'* d'un patrimoine sucrier - compris au sens industriel du terme - le principe d'installation végétale que crée Hervé, présente une trame spatiale qui déploie une proximité immédiate avec la réalité sociale de l'habitation." Sophie Ravion D'Ingianni, *Hervé Beuze: Matrices*, exh. cat. (Le Françõis, Martinique: Fondation Clément, 2007), n.p.

The theme of insularity that is at the base of Beuze's artistic practice, reaches bigger proportions when we look at the case of Cuba. Coined by Cuban art historian Yolanda Wood as *insulomanía*, the study of the contours of the island as an iconographic paradigm has been a discursive tool for a generation of Cuban artists working in the 1990s and the 2000s. What distinguishes the insular vision of Cuban artists toward their own island, beside the unique political situation in which they find themselves, is also the zoomorphic shape of their country. "Rarely," explains Woods, "has geography achieved so original a drawing as to provide the island with the shape of an alligator or crocodile, an animal native of this region, astute in his apparent calm and able to do the most unbelievable pranks."[168] I would argue that the zoomorphic form of Cuba's cartography functions less as a metaphor and more as an opportunity to practice with the plastic possibilities of the island. In other words, the island became in the 1990s an iconographic paradigm—a visual shorthand—for the state of inside exile or *insile* faced by Cuban artists.

As such, artists the likes of Antonio Eligio Fernández, aka Tonel, and Ibrahim Miranda, among others, have used the cartography of the island to examine diverse issues of the political and cultural identity of Cuba. Tonel, whose criticism of the tokenism that identity-based artworks pandered to, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, created an installation titled *Bloqueo* (figure 39) in 1989 that was made of cement blocks arranged in the form of Cuba. Shown at the 3rd Havana Biennial the same year the Berlin Wall fell,

[168] "Pocas veces la geografía ha logrado un dibujo tan original al dotar a la isla con una configuración de caimán o cocodrilo, animal autóctono de esta región, astuto en su aparente tranquilidad y capaz de hacer las más increíbles travesuras." Yolanda Wood, "Visión de las islas en el arte del Caribe contemporáneo," Latin American Studies Association, http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/Lasa2000/YWood.PDF

his representation of the island should not be confused with an exaltation of patriotism.[169] Curator and critic Eugenio Valdés Figueroa called this work a "milestone in contemporary Cuban art" for its ability to summarize the formal and conceptual concerns of a generation of Cuban artists.[170] "On the one hand," Valdés Figueroa expounded, "[in this work] the island is presented as an icon: the island-thing, the island-sign; sinuous and almost zoomorphic, as we see in almost all representations. On the other, it appears like a structure: the island built with cement blocks that also form the text. It was a semantic game that turned the work into a parody of rhetorical codes; the map built with cement blocks was a redundancy of the statement *bloqueo* (blockade) but also its meaning."[171]

The success of Tonel's *Bloqueo* is hinged upon the level of iconicity achieved between the *bloques* or blocks used as materials to construct the artwork and the economic, commercial, and financial penalty imposed by the US against Cuba since 1960 called *bloqueo* or embargo. The deliberate arrangement of the cement blocks in the form of Cuba references an isolation that runs deeper than the seclusion in which it has had to operate as a result of the economic sanctions forced on the island. In addition to the

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[169] On November 9, 1989 the Berlin wall fell reuniting, as a result, East and West Germany. That same year, as Charles Esche reminds us in the introduction to *Making Art Global*, the World Wide Web was invented. The year 1989 was also a watershed for art from the so-called Third World. Not only did the III Havana Biennial—lauded for expanding the global territory of contemporary art—opened on November 1, the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* also inaugurated in Paris, which launched Cuban artist José Bedia into prominence. More than any other year, the irony of 1989 must have been felt in blockaded-Cuba with a heavy heart.

[170] "Por una parte la isla se presentaba como ícono: la isla-cosa, la isla-signo; sinuosa y casi zoomorfa, como la vemos en casi todas las representaciones; por otra parte, aparecía como estructura: la isla construida, con bloques de cemento que también formaban el texto. Se trataba de un juego semántico, que convertía la obra en una parodia de los códigos retóricos; el mapa construido con bloques de cemento era una redundancia del enunciado 'bloqueo', pero también su significado." Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, "La llave y el ojo en la cerradura. De construcciones y utopias en el arte cubano contemporáneo," in *Nosotros, los más infieles: Narraciones críticas sobre el arte cubano (1993-2005)*, ed. Andrés Isaac Santana (La Habana, Cuba: CENDEAC, 2007), 721.

[171] Ibid.

linguistic parallels between the nouns *bloque* (block) and *bloqueo* (blockade, embargo), there is also the heaviness of the materials used that adds another level of signification to the piece. If one were to complete the image of this map of Cuba by placing it in its natural context, the sea, it would mean that the island would drown; it would sink to the bottom of the ocean. The persisting interest by artists such as Tonel and others on the silhouette of Cuba has reiterated the need to read these forms of expression as an articulation of the insular consciousness of Cuba.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Virgilio Piñera's poem "La isla en peso," originally published in 1943, was revived and cited in numerous examples of the visual arts of Cuba. Variably translated as the "The Island Burden" or "The Whole Island," Piñera's poem is a somber exploration of the trope of insularity in this Caribbean island. In fact, Tonel's *Bloqueo* is suggestive of the weight or burden implied in the poem's title that drags the island down preventing it from moving forward. Other artists have focused on the first four verses of the poem for the power these have of contrasting the insular state versus the surrounding sea:

> La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes
> me obliga a sentarme en la mesa del café.
> Si no pensara que el agua me rodea como un cáncer
> hubiera podido dormir a pierna suelta.[172]

In the poem and in works where the silhouette of the island is evoked such as Tonel's *El bloqueo*, Sandra Ramos's *La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes* (The Curse of Being Surrounded by Water, 1993, figure 40), and even Miguel Piña's series *Aguas*

[172] "The curse of being completely surrounded by water
condemns me to this café table.
If I didn't think that water encircled me like a cancer
I'd sleep in peace." Virgilio Piñera, *La isla en peso/The Whole Island*, trans. Mark Weiss (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2010), n.p.

baldías (Water Wastelands, 1992-1994, figure 41), there is a constant tension between the self and the two opposing forces of land and water. The sea is both suffocating and alluring; the land, therefore, reduced to a vessel set adrift and floating in no particular direction.

The negotiation of this attraction has been explored in Caribbean art through images of ships or boats. While artworks that explore the shape and contours of the islands in the Caribbean ask us to consider what insularity means for islanders, the recurrent use of the ship or boat invites viewers to shift their point of view. In other words, if works based on the maps of islands deal with themes of enclosure and stasis, the symbol of the boat imagines the mobility of those issues from a counter-discursive perspective. Together, the symbols of the map and the boat point to a maritime approach that focuses on the geographical formation of islands and the fact that they are surrounded by water.[173]

For instance, in Allora & Calzadilla's video *Under Discussion* (figure 42) from 2005, the artistic duo comprised by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla trace the outline of the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, on a makeshift boat made from a table turned upside down. On the video, a young local man linked to the fishing community of Vieques—a 21 x 4 miles island off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico—navigates an upturned conference table with a motor attached to it through coastal areas that had recently been contested by the locals as well as the Puerto Rican government against US officials. From 1941 to 2003, the US Navy occupied two thirds of Vieques and used it as a weapons-testing range. Angry at the environmental impact of such military practices,

[173] Michelle Stephens, "What Is an Island? Caribbean Studies and the Contemporary Visual Artist," *Small Axe*, no. 41 (July 2013): 11.

locals' discontent exacerbated in 1999 when a practice-bomb killed Vieques-native David Sanes who worked as a security guard for the US Navy. *Under discussion* picks up after the successful demilitarization of Vieques in 2003 when competing interests could not agree on the best path for the island's development. In the words of the artists, "We got interested in the idea of the conversation being stuck. Nothing was moving, and that was a common frustration for everyone, so we started with the idea that we wanted to mobilize the discussion."[174] Inspired to do something productive out of this impasse, Allora & Calzadilla decide to flip the discussion table and have the young man pilot the boat "along the historic fishing route, along the eastern lands of Vieques, where the local fishermen has first witnessed the destruction of the local ecosystem and mobilized against the ecological damage that also damaged their livelihood."[175]

The video invites us to have a double change in perspective by showing a table that has been literally upended and directing our gaze into the island from the outside—rather than looking from inside the island toward the sea, which is the direction implied in the Cuban artworks previously analyzed. While it may seem as a small gesture, this shift in perspective has significant consequences for the way artists interpret the region of the Caribbean through visual signs. Allora & Calzadilla have asserted that in the case of this work they first thought of the form: a table boat that could be used as a metaphor to mobilize ideas. Recently, in an article published in 2012, Guillermina De Ferrari has described the ship as "both enclosure and vehicle—something like a traveling neighborhood—a kind of entity that fosters relations of continuity and discontinuity with

[174] Art21, "Allora & Calzadilla: 'Under Discussion' and Vieques," http://www.art21.org/texts/allora-calzadilla/interview-allora-calzadilla-under-discussion-and-vieques

[175] Ibid.

various land-based societies."[176] In this neighborhood of one but representing the many, the table in *Under Discussion* seeks to trace, through the wake left in the sea, both the history of militarization and pollution left by the US on the island of Vieques and the hope for a sustainable future.

Many thinkers such as De Ferrari have analyzed the sign of the ship in the history of the Caribbean and the Atlantic; the most salient of these is perhaps the British scholar Paul Gilroy and his influential book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Borrowing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, or the literary representation of time and space as constituted as a whole, Gilroy described the ship as the symbol that allows for the rethinking of modernity by looking at the history of the Atlantic and the African Diaspora in the Western Hemisphere. He also rightly asserted that the image of the ship make us focus our attention "on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts."[177] I am especially interested in the language Gilroy uses to describe the ship as a mobile element working in between and connecting fixed spaces. Moreover, the British author compellingly argues that ships invite us to shift our perspective in regard to the where and how modernity began. However, by crafting his argument around the Atlantic Ocean and not mentioning the Caribbean Sea, Gilroy reduces the diversity of migrations and, in a way, discards the Caribbean artist's agency in producing cultural artifacts indicative of a process that favors a fluid and maritime approach to the formation of modernity.

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[176] Guillermina De Ferrari, "The Ship, the Plantation, and the Polis: Reading Gilroy and Glissant as Moral Philosophy," *Comparative Literature Studies* 49, no. 2 (2012): 187.

[177] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4.

The examples of artworks covered in this chapter that analyze the icon of the boat, extend and stretch the time-space qualities of the chronotope of the ship as explained by Gilroy. In *The Ties that Bind IV* (figure 43), one of six works on paper from *The Ties that Bind* series from 1994, Haitian-American artist Rejin Leys uses the sign of the ship as a vehicle that leads us to draw a parallel between the Middle Passage and the Windward Passage—a 50-mile strait that separates the northwest of Haiti from the easternmost region of Cuba. Other symbols in this work are the mast and sail, shaped by reproductions of the inside decks of a slave freighter, and the background waves, made of alternating rows of barbed wire and shackles. The most eye-catching of these symbols, however, might be the feet at the bottom of the boat that appears to be putting the craft in motion.

If we forget for a moment of our own specific location within the terraqueous globe and look at this work the same way and in the same direction in which we were to study a map—with the east to the left without regard to its actual position—and then traced a cartographic route for this vessel, one could say that the boat is heading east. From a Caribbean standpoint and considering the two aforementioned straits, this could either suggest a return back to Africa or Haiti. In their discussion of Edwidge Danticat's "The Children of the Sea," Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Martha Daisy Kelehan mention, "this 'walk back to Africa' across the water becomes a powerful metaphor when considering the risks of undertaking to cross the Atlantic on a frail boat or a makeshift craft."[178] The expression "walk back to Africa," which is a recurrent figure of speech in both literature and art, does not just allude to a desire for a reverse diasporic experience

[178] Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Martha Daisy Kelehan, "The 'Children of the Sea," in *Displacements and Transformations in Caribbean Cultures* (Gainsville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 135.

but it also calls to mind other more contemporary intra-Caribbean migrations. Furthermore, this hybrid boat-with-feet reminds us of the term "boat people"—a term used to designate the undocumented Haitian immigrants who began going to the US in 1972.

In previous interviews, Leys has commented that she uses the half-human, half-boat image in a sarcastic manner. Troubled by the fact that Haitian refugees have, for years, endured this demeaning term, Leys says:

> This series began with a look at the phrase 'boat people' to show how absurd it is. Because it sounds like a reference to someone [who] is not quite human, it works [in] a way to justify unfair and abusive treatment of refugees. I thought I could show [a] literal interpretation of what the phrase implies. [What would 'boat people' actually look like?] But this led me to an exploration of the contrast between the refugees crisis and slavery during the colonial period as an example of forced migration.[179]

As a sign, the boat in Leys's *The Ties that Bind IV* is an example of a time-space vessel for the work points to "the intersection of axes and fusion of indicators" that characterize the "artistic chronotope," according to Bakhtin. The *chronos* to which the works refers combines the Middle Passage, the Windward Passage, and the migratory waves of "boat people" trying to reach the coasts of the US; and the *topos* represented involve at least three maritime routes navigated between Africa and the Caribbean, Cuba and Haiti, and Haiti and the US.

The metamorphosis of humans into boats is a trope that other Caribbean artists have explored. Enveloped in an agitated wind and current, the figure in Christopher Cozier's *The Castaway* (figure 44)—a detail from his 2006-present mixed media series

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[179] Rejin Leys, *The Ties that Bind=Les Liens Qui Nous Enchaînent: Gravures et installations* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Les Ateliers Jérôme, 2000), quoted in Jerry Philogene, "Visual Narratives of Cultural Memory and Diasporic Identities: Two Contemporary Haitian American Artists" *Small Axe*, no. 16 (September 1994): 89.

Tropical Night—is set afloat. Along with the other elements such as the map, the anthropomorphized boat, and the sea, the castaway weaves a pattern that unsettles the fixity of place and visually narrates the Caribbean condition. With his *The Castaway*, Trinidadian artist Cozier speaks of the ways in which Creole citizens in the Caribbean have always negotiated histories of diverse but linked places while doing so from their local transnational vantage point.

As in the case of Rejin Leys's *The Ties that Bind IV*, the direction faced by the swimmer setting this craft in motion is also positioned to the left or east, if one were to take the cardinal points alluded to in the map that acts as sail as indicative of the path of this vessel. Furthermore, while the sail is made from an aged and worn-out map of the Old World, the one silhouette that is most noticeable is that of the continent of Africa. The organization into two distinctive halves in the composition of *The Castaway* further points to a maritime route and a terrestrial root. Moreover, if we stop for a second to consider the definition of castaway as the adjective for someone who has been left adrift as a survivor of a shipwreck, it may be possible to interpret the figure in this work as a metaphor for the continuation of migration patterns that, as the Middle Passage, can be violently punishing on those forced into exile or who risk to make the voyage.

As part of a larger series, *The Castaway* is one vignette in a series of 19 other images arranged in the form of a grid (figure 45). Seen as whole, the diverse imagery employed suggests a linear narrative. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that while this might be Cozier's lexicon of a *Tropical Night* (the title of the series) the purpose of the work is not necessarily to elucidate the Caribbean. "I felt," the Trinidadian artist has previously stated, "that I lived in a space outside of a clear narrative with a clear

point of origin and destination or point of arrival."[180] Having jettisoned any desire to tell a story in a linear fashion, Cozier instead invites us to make relations between certain images that do not purport to tell any one specific truth. As someone who has championed for the past three decades and continues to advocate for the arts of the Caribbean in his role of artist, curator, and overall cultural promoter, Cozier paints in brown and sepia colors personal notes, incomplete sentences, "a visual stenography with which he sketches his location and state of mind."[181]

In this chapter I have attempted to give an introduction to the ways art history and semiotics have grappled with explaining the ways visual works transmit meaning and how the viewer receives and understands that message. In turn, I have used these lessons to craft a model or way of analyzing Caribbean artworks that, with their intrinsic itinerant qualities, echo the dynamic process of creolization. I have called this method of studying Caribbean icons Creole semiotics. In the chapter that follows, I will expatiate on the notion of Creole semiotics as a concept that foregrounds the perspective of the sea.

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[180] Christopher Cozier, "Between Narratives and Other Spaces," in *Pensamiento crítico en el nuevo arte latinoamericano*, eds. Kevin Power and Lupe Álvarez (Teguise, Lanzarote, Islas Canarias: Fundación César Manrique. 2006), 745.

[181] Annie Paul, "The Enigma of Survival: Travelling Beyond the Expat Gaze," *Art Journal* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 54. Cozier is also co-director of Alice Yard in Trinidad, a space for creative experiment, collaboration, and improvisation.

Chapter Four

Caribbean *Seaing*: The Signifying Practice of the Caribbean Sea in Art

> The movement of the beach, this rhythmic rhetoric of a shore,
> do not seem to me gratuitous. They weave a circularity that draws me in.
> -Édouard Glissant[182]

4.1 Introduction: The Bait

In wondering if there is a domain that semiology could not reach, Roland Barthes concludes in *Mythologies,* his collection of essays from 1957: "In a single day, how many really non-signifying fields do we cross? Very few, sometimes none. Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, signals, sign-boards, clothes, suntan even, which are so many messages for me." Barthes's supposition implies that visual language, and by extension knowledge, is intrinsically a dry land affair. In an attempt to sail the waters that Barthes did not venture to navigate, I would like to highlight the signifying potential of the Caribbean Sea by analyzing a set of artworks that adopt the perspective of this body of water and, in turn, ask the viewer to change their point of view. My analysis will journey from paintings made by Winslow Homer in the tradition of American Realism to a conceptual installation executed by Colombian artist Álvaro Barrios. Also informing my interpretation of the visual arts practice of enunciating the Caribbean Sea are examples from Haitian Vodou art and other poignant contemporary examples from the Hispanic Caribbean.

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[182] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 122.

In academia, there has been an interest in the past twenty years or less to shift the attention from area studies (i.e., East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, North America, Russia and Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and Oceania) to groupings around maritime basins.[183] This new alteration in perspective from land to water has helped bring into focus the ways littoral societies have played an important role in linking disparate parts of the globe. No longer peripheral societies but cosmopolitan in their own ways, the basin framework has afforded the surrounding countries a key place in understanding the movement and flux between cultures and in challenging static models of thinking about identity.[184] At the core of this basin-centered model are four main bodies of water made up by the Indian Ocean, the Black and Caspian Seas, the Mediterranean Sea, and finally the Atlantic Ocean, although the Pacific is steadily becoming the fifth maritime case study. While this change in perspective has provided a more equal footing to societies which had otherwise remained in the background as passive agents and has widen the range of issues that affects the way civilizations have engaged throughout history, the maritime basin model still responds to a hierarchical way of partitioning the globe. The fact that there is a core group of marine areas is symptomatic of entrenched notions of importance of certain groups and

[183] "The culmination of this intellectual ferment was the initiation of a new Ford Foundation program in 1997 called 'Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies' (Ford Foundation 1997). Initially, Ford offered modest seed grants to thirty universities across the country to support new ways of thinking, writing, and teaching about the world-approaches that were place-specific and language-centered but that could also cross the boundaries between different disciplines and scholarly communities, between different areas of the world, and between U.S. academics and their counterparts in the regions they studied (Volkman 1999). In June 1999 the foundation awarded larger, three-year grants to allow eighteen of the initial thirty universities to continue their efforts. Among the programs funded in both phases of Crossing Borders was a Duke University initiative entitled 'Oceans Connect: Culture, Capital, and Commodity Flows' across Basins." Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, "A Maritime Response to the Crisis in Area Studies," *Geographical Review* 89, no. 2 (1999): 165.

[184] Ibid., 166.

civilizations. Still in its nascent state, however, the sea and ocean framework of analysis will hopefully avoid inadvertently classifying other bodies of water as "backwater" and will encourage diverse comparative studies between larger and smaller maritime regions.

The importance of seas and oceans to the history of art is not a contemporary phenomenon. As topoi, shipwrecks and seafaring became particularly popular during the Romantic period in art. In French and British painting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, specifically, shipwrecks represented man's struggle against the overwhelming power of nature. Shipwrecks are characterized by being imbued with failure—a trope that speaks to the limitations of humans when pitted against the forces of nature. "For the Romantic imaginary," asserts English art historian Emma Cocker, "the trope of failure indicates the inability to comprehend the nature of infinity and the boundlessness of the universe."[185] This trope, it turns out, was not unique to the French or British context but we see similar examples of maritime struggles and calamities occurring in the Caribbean waters.

One of the best-known painters of Caribbean seascapes was none other than the American Winslow Homer. In 1884, *The Century Magazine* commissioned Homer to illustrate an article about Nassau, Bahamas, written by William C. Church. This would mark the beginning of several travels to the Caribbean region, which produced works such as the acclaimed *The Gulf Stream* from 1899 (figure 1). We know very little from the time Homer spent in this region. We can ascertain, however, from the essay in *The Century Magazine* and the profuse body of work he left behind that in his stay in the

[185] Emma Cocker, "Salvaging a Romantic Trope: The Conceptual Resurrection of Shipwreck in Recent Art Practice" in *Shipwreck in Art and Literature: Images and Interpretations from Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. Carl Thompson (New York & London: Routledge, 2014), 225-226.

Bahamas he captured the island's architecture, the practice of sponge and coral fishing, palms and other fruit trees, as well as landscapes and seascapes in more than thirty watercolors.[186] In a letter from 1902 to his dealer Roland Knoedler, we hear from Homer himself when he responds in a brisk and caustic manner "I have crossed the Gulf Stream ten times & I should know something about it" to incessant questions from "ladies" about the subject matter of the *The Gulf Stream*.[187] In other words, his were not the product of a tourist or Sunday painter but an object of study that would engulf him for at least half a decade.

In regard to this painting and the subject matter at hand—the Caribbean Sea—it must be noted that the stretch of the Gulf Stream that Homer must have painted is the strong current that runs between the Florida Keys and the Bahamas and just north of Cuba. From letters we know of the importance Homer placed in capturing an accurate depiction of the water in *The Gulf Stream*. After exhibiting in 1900 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he wrote "I painted on the picture since it was in Philadelphia & improved it very much (more of the Deep Sea water than before)."[188] In his monograph on the painting titled *Weathering the Storm: Inside Winslow Homer's Gulf Stream*, art historian Peter H. Wood carefully details the significance of every one of the elements in Homer's work. From the stalks of sugar cane on board the boat to the fully formed

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[186] William C. Church, "A Midwinter Report," *The Century Magazine* XXXIII, no. 4 (February, 1887), 499-506 and "Homer in the Bahamas," National Gallery of Art http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/education/teachers/lessons-activities/ecology/homer-bahamas.html

[187] Letter of 1902 quoted in Nikolai Cikovsky, Jr. and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 120; reprinted in Peter H. Wood, *Weathering the Storm: Inside Winslow Homer's Gulf Stream* (Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), 42.

[188] Natalie Spassky, "Winslow Homer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art" *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 39, no. 4 (Spring 1982): 37.

waterspout to the right of the painting, Wood's analysis is perhaps one of the most complete and thorough ones to exist about *The Gulf Stream*. For instance, his study of the water includes an examination of not only the boat and the black sailor but also of the ship in the horizon, the sharks and the flying fish barely hovering above, and the ominous wave directly behind the vessel. Regarding the latter element, Wood has asserted:

> Such cresting waves are commonly known as whitecaps, for obvious reasons. The often appear in shallow water close to shore or in clusters across a wide area at sea when wind and wave conditions are right. But if we are in the open ocean, as we seem to be, then why is there a single large whitecap in the center of the picture? We need to consider the possibility that there may be some sort of subliminal suggestion here, something that goes beyond a purely oceanographic representation.[189]

He goes on to say that for the audience of the time thinking of the word *whitecap* might have recalled the concept of *white caps*, a term whose origin Wood suggests comes from the state of Indiana when night riders disguised in white caps terrorized black families and drove them off their lands and in several cases even lynched people.[190] Whether or not Homer painted the whitecap as a symbolism for the terror faced by many African Americans in the mainland, what is visually admissible is that the fury of the water—with the specks of blood scattered between fore-, middle-, and background—is the most menacing element in the painting.

In the literature about *The Gulf Stream* it is a convention to state that an "aura of impending tragedy" frames the boat and its sailor. Specifically, the four sharks that lurk in the foreground signal, as Wood has assertively pointed out, the long association between these marine animals and the history of the Middle Passage and slave trade in the Americas. No doubt informed by actual accounts but also by a morbid taste in

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[189] Wood, *Weathering the Storm*, 52-53.

[190] Ibid., 54.

narratives that involve flesh-eating sharks, history books are not empty of stories that recount horrific scenes such as how the "requiem shark" got its name because it accompanied vessels on transatlantic voyages "eager to feed on bodies tossed over the stern."[191] Other claims are equally repulsive such as the following described by Wood in his book: "The number of corpses thrown overboard was so enormous at the height of the slave trade that certain types of shark may have actually altered their feeding and migration patterns to take advantage of the windfall." [192] While this last point is particularly fascinating, its veracity or extent of truth falls outside the scope of this dissertation; however, I am interested in exploring how perhaps this is not necessarily the fate about to be bestowed upon the black man in *The Gulf Stream*.

Earlier in 1885, Homer painted a watercolor that he titled *Shark Fishing* (figure 46) that shows two fishermen seizing a shark, mouth agape, that has just been hooked. The shark, in its sideways position, the lifted caudal fin or tail, and visible dorsal fin, resembles the two main sharks in *The Gulf Stream*. Now, to be clear, aside from the fact that the man on the boat is casually and nonchalantly looking away from the sharks he has in front of him, there is no other evidence to suggest that the sharks in the *The Gulf Stream* have been caught or seized the way they have been in *Shark Fishing*. However, with *Shark Fishing* Homer left open the possibility that sharks do not always represent the frightful finitude of life. In fact, another painting that must have been in the imaginary

[191] I have refrained here from including the most gruesome of these stories, which Wood does quote in his book. The sources reprinted in *Weathering the Storm* include: Adam Jones, *German Sources for West African History, 1599-1669* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1983), 236; Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: James Phillips, 1788), 31; George Francis Dow, *Slave Ships and Slaving* (1927; reprint, Cambridge, Md.: Cornell Maritime Press, 1968), 71; "Narrative of a Voyage from London to the West Indies, 1714-1715," add. 39946, p. 12, British Museum.

[192] Ibid., 75-77.

of late nineteenth-century viewers was the American masterpiece by John Singleton Copley: *Watson and the Shark* from 1778 (figure 47). Similar to Homer's *Shark Fishing*, this painting illustrates a shark that is about to be harpooned and seized. While the shark in Copley's painting did manage to bite the leg of a young Brook Watson—who went on to become a businessman and politician—the artwork is essentially about his rescue.

This is all to say that the visual symbolism of the sea is often more complex than just categorizing a painting as a "shipwreck" or describing the theme as "perilous." In the sections that follow, the allure of the sea and the violence that surrounds it sway in a way that is not dissimilar to the rhythm of waves. That is the pulse of the sea. When I see Homer's *The Gulf Stream* I cannot help but think that the perspective of the painter is from the water. Sitting on a boat across a man who is surely in a state of turmoil, albeit not necessarily on the brink of death, Homer probably imagined a depiction that captured the intricate ways in which the sea expresses an aesthetics of violence that can be as attractive as it can also be terrifying.

Despite art's long interest in looking toward the sea, it could hardly be attributed to a concern for a maritime approach that emphasizes cross-cultural connections. In the case of Homer, his observations of the Caribbean Sea and the black sailors he painted are often read as objects of study. In fact, Wood has noted, "With a few exceptions, the cottage industry of Homer scholarship had given almost no attention to the numerous, illuminating representations of blacks in North America and the Caribbean created at various stages of the artist's extended career."[193] Hardly anything is ever said about the relationships he developed while living in the Bahamas, Bermuda, and Cuba or the

[193] Ibid., 34.

impact his presence as a painter had on these islands. It is true that the very private Homer left very little record of his personal life but research has not attempted to account for the people who must have crossed his life while visiting the Caribbean. Seldom is *The Century Magazine*'s article about Nassau analyzed and rarely is an intersectional reading made between the text and the illustrations made by Homer.

4.2 Follow the *Lwa,* Listen to *Lasirène*

No other artistic practice represents the duality of the sea as the water deities in Haitian Vodou. In religions from the African Diaspora and in West Africa, water is a central element in the pantheons of gods and goddesses. In the context of Haiti, Lasirène (or mermaid in Haitian Kreyol) is one of the many *lwas* (literally meaning law) or deities in the Afro-Caribbean religion of Vodou. The scholarship on Lasirène has focused on how this *lwa* asks us "to reappraise Western notions of selfhood in order to understand the complex interactions between the practitioners and their gods in this religious community."[194] Understanding this is vital in order to grasp the ways African Diasporic religions come to life in the lives of the men and women who practice them. I want, nevertheless, to take a break from the anthropocentric readings of Lasirène and instead see how this water deity reflects back on its source. What does this Vodou goddess say about the sea, seeing how it is a divine product of a different type of epistemology? For this, I will concentrate this section in analyzing *Mermaid* (figure 48), a painting by Haitian artist Rigaud Benoit.

As a mode of introduction, Haitian Vodou has been defined as "a compendium of a deliberate amalgam" of traditions rooted in Dahomey (present-day Benin) that were

[194] Roberto Strongman, "Transcorporeality in Vodou," *The Journal of Haitian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 5.

shaped "by the confluence of contentious forces Haiti encountered in the international system, the history of colonialism, and 'race' as defined in northern Europe and North America." [195] In their forced voyage to the Americas, Dahomean traditions were inevitably put into contact with other foreign belief systems, which invariably had an impact on Haitian Vodou. Or, as emeritus professor Donald Cosentino has elegantly phrased: "While the captives confronted the dramatis personae of colonialism: surviving Indians, slave masters, Catholic priests, buccaneers, soldiers, traders…; the lwa met—and mastered—a parallel cast of Catholic saints, Masonic ritual masters and phantasmagoric beasts from the folklore of Bretagne."[196] Vodou, thus, is a prime example of not only the syncretism of established religions but of the process of creolization whereby a new and unique mode of belief arose under more than precarious conditions.

Lasirène is one of those *lwas* or supernatural beings with an older doppelganger found in the water spirit of Mami Wata, a snake charmer and mermaid found in diverse places across Africa and in the Americas. According to Henry Drewal, leading art historian in the study of Mami Wata,

> The concept and image of *Mami Wata* (and perhaps the name) as an African divinity with overseas origins probably dates to the earliest European-African encounters of the late fifteenth century. Between 1490 and 1530, a Sapi sculptor on the coast of Sierra Leone was commissioned by Portuguese visitors to carve an image of a European mermaid. He flanked the mermaid with crocodiles, thus immediately Africanizing her.[197]

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[195] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), xix.

[196] Donald Cosentino, ed. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 25.

[197] Henry John Drewal, "Introduction," in *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 2.

From Mami Wata, Lasirène has borrowed not just the mermaid-like shape but also the attributes of being a trans figure, a hybrid spirit, a dual force "with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination, generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances."[198]

The late art historian Marilyn Houlberg wrote prolifically about the figure of Lasirène in Haitian art. We owe, in part, to her the knowledge we have today of the diverse ways this deity has been represented in the visual culture of Haiti. Houlberg traced various examples that show the fluid ways in which Lasirène is personified. In addition to her fishtail, she is often represented with a comb, a mirror, and a trumpet. Her hair is sometimes half blond, half black. As a sister of Ezili Freda and Ezili Danto—the major female *lwas* in the Vodou pantheon—Lasirène has a bit of both the Rada and Petwo (cool and hot, respectively) families from where the Ezilis come from. Thus, the same way she can bring you romance and riches, she can also be quite violent and lure you to a watery grave. Houlberg has described her in the following way: "She can be a seductive coquette or the angry, demanding mistress. She can change in front of your eyes. She is part black, part white; part Haitian, part European; part Rada, part Petwo. And, of course, she is also part human and part fish."[199] Given her fluidity in turning from one thing to the other, it becomes the artist's challenge to give her a concrete form.

The use of bold colors, naïf composition, and the exploration of Vodou subject matter have characterize Haitian painting, especially the type that was promoted with the founding of the Centre d'Art in 1944 by American artist Dewitt Peters. One such artist to

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[198] Ibid.

[199] Marilyn Houlberg, "Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Arts of Haitian Vodou," *African Arts* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1996), 33.

train at this school was Rigaud Benoit (1911–1986) who is today lauded as being one of the most highly regarded painters in the history of Haitian art. His relationship with the Centre and how he became part of it is shrouded by a veil of inconsistencies, however. While many sources state that Benoit was a chauffeur for Peters in 1944 and was inspired to paint after seeing the artworks displayed at the Centre, there are others that tell a different story. In his recounting of how he met Benoit, Peters says the following:

> …not long after the receipt of the painting by [Philomé] Obin, a young man came in with a crude earthenware vase delicately decorated with roses; he said this had been painted by another person and that he was merely asked to bring it in to see if we would buy it. We did, and by another happy chance gave the man a piece of cardboard and asked him to get the decorator of the vase to paint a picture on it. He took the cardboard and vanished, reappearing with the painting some time later, after we had quite forgotten him.…We asked him the price of the picture and, after a little hesitation, he took the plunge and said $2. In a moment of what can only be called inspiration we gave him $4. Plus several much larger pieces of cardboard and a friendly pat on the back which he was to transmit to the artist whom we had not yet met. Within a space of some weeks he was back, but this time with four extraordinary strange and poetic pictures—an unbelievable advance over the first. In our enthusiasm we now insisted that he must bring the artist in immediately. It now appeared that there was not one artist but two; we said bring them both in. Doubtfully, he said he would try and went off down the stairs. In about ten minutes he was back, but without the artists. Where are they? They didn't exist. He himself was the artist of all the pictures, but he had been too doubtful and timid to admit it. Rigaud Benoit is now recognized as one of the most delicate and charming of all the Haitian popular painters, with an impressive great mural to his credit in the Episcopalian Cathedral in Port-au-Prince.[200]

I quote Peters at length here to give some context to the beginnings of Benoit as a painter and the type of environment under which he thrived as an artist. This is also the setting where Benoit created *Mermaid*.

Despite having a fishtail for legs and feet, the mythical sea creature in *Mermaid* stands frontally and firmly on a makeshift canoe that doubles as a drum. The craft floats

[200] Dewitt Peters, "Haitian Art…How it Started," in *Readings in Latin American Art*, ed. Patrick Frank (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 69.

amid a sea of fish and across blue waters that seem almost indistinguishable from the blue sky. Also in the upper register of the painting are a few mounds or mountains, or perhaps the grey color signify that these are rock formations protruding from the sea. In the very far back and about to disappear on the horizon line and behind one of those greyish hills is a ship. With her chest exposed and her blond hair flowing back, this brown or light-skinned mermaid holds in her right hand a *pakèt kongo* and in her left she carries an *ason*.[201] Benoit has replaced the comb and mirror typically associated with Lasirène with two objects more closely related to the Vodou rituals practiced by the Rada (cool) side of the religion. The artist has also left aside the trumpet as the instrument usually linked to this *lwa* and has chosen for her instead a drum equipped with drumstick and all. A puzzling motor-like machine is attached to the back of the canoe with a manual crank sticking out. The mermaid's attention is not on any of these two last objects; rather, it aims into the distance.[202]

What attracted me to Benoit's work and other representations of seascapes, if we might call them that, painted in the tradition of Haitian Vodou arts is the link these artworks have to a belief system that is intrinsically creolized. In other words, as a religion that resulted from the need and desire to carry on spiritual elements imported

[201] From Haitian Kreyol, the term *pakèt kongo* refers to an object of devotion or charm used by the *houngan* (male priest) and *mambos* (female priest) during Haitian Vodou rituals. The *pakèt*, whose counterpart in Africa is the Congolese *nkisi*, is traditionally made of a combination of herbs, soil, and vegetable matter, and wrapped up in fabric and decorated with ribbons, feathers, and sequins. An *ason* is a rattle used to conduct services in Rada Vodou ceremonies. The rattle is made from a gourd surrounded by a loose web of beads and snake vertebrae with a small bell attached to it. Both the *pakèt kongo* and *ason* are powerful, intermediary objects that connect people on earth with the higher power of the *lwa*.

[202] Curiously, Benoit's rendition of Lasirène has in the center of her forehead what looks like a bindi used in Hinduism to denote a third eye or the location of the sixth chakra. In the context of this painting, Benoit perhaps painted it as a way of enhancing the spiritual aspect of this *lwa*. It is important to note that occurrences of a "third eye" are not uncommon in the arts of Haitian Vodou. See: Marilyn Houlberg, "The Ritual Cosmos of Twins and Other Sacred Children," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald Cosentino (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), n. 26, 425.

from Africa and combine them, out of necessity or wish, with the Roman Catholic religions of the slave master, Haitian Vodou is one very strong manifestation of creolization in the Caribbean. In considering every perspective from where to analyze visual representations of the Caribbean Sea, it seems thus necessary to ask what the sea symbolizes for practitioners of Vodou. What attributes does Benoit's *Mermaid* have that can be reflected back to the sea?

In one of the many introductory books to Haitian Vodou, the chapter dedicated to the *lwa* of Lasirène begins with a reminder of the relationship between Haiti and the ocean:

> In Haiti, the ocean is never far away. The waters off the Haitian coast are among the deepest in the region: within a mile from Cap-Haïtien, the sea is over three thousand feet deep. Well-developed coral reefs fringe long stretches of coastline, along with highly productive and spectacular barrier and atoll reefs, and walls of coral, along the shelf edge.[203]

As a nation facing the water on three of its four cardinal directions, it is not surprising that there would be a deity that conveys the polyvalent qualities of the sea. Some of the ways in which Lasirène has been characterized find a one-to-one correlation with traditional descriptions of the sea; for instance, her long and voluminous hair stands for waves and her song can be equated with the sound of the water and of waves crashing. The drum, the *ason*, and the *pakèt kongo* links Benoit's mermaid with Kongo rhythms and traditions. This is, therefore, not a static sea. It is a medium that has enabled the connection between far away places and across times. The precarious motor-like machine, on the other hand, alludes to more contemporary times and thus to more contemporary travels. More important and something that could not be stressed enough is

[203] Kenaz Filan, *The Haitian Vodou Handbook: Protocols for Riding with the Lwa* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2007), 97.

the fact that Lasirène is a *lwa* that represents water as a spirit, as a higher power that rules over humans. This is not the romantic conflict of man against nature because nature here always has the upper hand.

By looking at Lasirène as one of the many manifestations of the epistemology of the Caribbean Sea I am applying a feminist perspective to my interpretation. Professor of African and African Diaspora Studies, Onise'eke Natasha Tinsley, has argued that the study of the pantheon of Ezili, which surely includes Lasirène, "offer[s] a more complex way of knowing Haitian womanhood than hegemonic feminism can produce."[204] Although it is always mentioned that Lasirène is married to Agwe, the *lwa* of oceans and whose Catholic counterpart is St. Ulrich, fertility is not the centerpiece of her being. She is often personified as an attractive and alluring figure—looking at her is like gazing at one's own reflection. "She hovers large and dark and silent," Houlberg describes her, "just below the surface of the water, a place Haitians call 'the back of the mirror.'"[205] Her magnetism, however, can sometimes be dangerous. "First the hat falls into the sea, and the person follows quickly after."[206] While it is true that she can be a benevolent spirit she is also as volatile as the sea: enticing but capable of luring people to a watery death.

Thus, it is a mistake to see Lasirène as a goddess of fertility. A common trope typically associated with the sea is that of fecundity, as a life-giving source. In the case of

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[204] Onise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans)gender," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2011), 422.

[205] Houlberg, "Sirens and Snakes," 33.

[206] Ibid. Although Houlberg does not mention it, this quote is taken from a popular Vodou song dedicated to Lasirène and to her sister Labalenn (the whale): ***Lasirenn, Labalenn, Chapo m tonbe nan lanmè. M ap fe kares pou Lasirenn, Chapo m tonbe nan lanmè. M ap fe kares pou Labalenn, Chapo m tonbe nan lanmè.*** (The Mermaid, the Whale, my hat fell into the sea. I caress the Mermaid, my hat fell into the sea. I caress the Whale, my hat fell into the sea.) Strongman, "Transcorporeality in Vodou," 4.

Lasirène it has been suggested that fertility is not what this deity is about the way it is perhaps for the spirit of Yemayá, the *orisha* found in Cuban Santeria. Even though there are references to the children of Lasirène and Agwe, these do not feature prominently in the pantheon of *lwas* nor is Lasirène known for her maternal instincts. This suggests to me that Haiti's approach to the sea and the ocean is much more bleak than what it may represent for a practitioner of Cuban *santería*, for example. As a marine entity that embraces both the beauty and the dangers of the sea, Lasirène's personification of water is not concerned with representing a unitary self that is the source of all other beings.[207] Instead, Lasirène is an outlet for Haitian Vodou artists to represent the aesthetic violence of the sea.

4.3 The Sea Embodied

In 1979, St. Lucian author Derek Walcott wrote the poem "The Sea is History" where he posits, from the first verses, a series of questions about the way the history of the sea that surrounds his home island—the Caribbean Sea—has been inscribed and what the instruments that aid us in remembering that history are.

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
> Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
> in that great vault. The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. The sea is History.[208]

The presence of questions point to a lack of certainty of how the history of the sea has been read when the tools that make up an archive are not there to be found. Walcott's poem takes issue "with the cultural myth that the ocean is outside and beyond history,

[207] Strongman, "Transcorporeality in Vodou,"27.

[208] Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History," *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* (London: Faber, 1984), 364.

that the interminable, repetitive cycle of the sea obliterates memory and temporality, and that a fully historicized land somehow stands diametrically opposed to an atemporal, 'ahistorical' sea."[209] The "great vault" that, as Walcott suggests, replaces the *landedness* of many a national archive, is located not beyond the sea but in it, on it, and deep under. "The unity is submarine," as Kamau Brathwaite would call it, another prolific Caribbean writer.

In the section that follows I want to continue the investigation of the Caribbean Sea as a discursive space for contemporary art. In the two previous sections I analyzed how the sea was a productive vantage point for Winslow Homer to paint his sea images and how, in the case of Haitian Vodou art, it is also a source of creative output. The following topic continues the thread that I have been trying to make throughout this chapter, which entails demonstrating how the Caribbean Sea is an outlet for exploring themes that are not covered by conventional modes of representation sanctioned by official archives. I would like to move to a series of example from the Hispanic Caribbean that utilize the aesthetic potential and appeal of the sea as a visual trope that speaks to the literal and symbolic absence of the corporeal body.

In 2009, Guatemalan performance artist, Regina José Galindo, returned to the Dominican Republic, where she staged *Tumba* for the international performance festival *Performar*. Three years prior to this work, in 2006, Galindo had enacted *Isla* (figure 50), also in the DR, where, as is customary in her work, she used her own body and bodily fluids as the medium for the performance. In *Isla*, Galindo laid down in fetal position on top of a promontory until she formed a puddle around her using her own urine. For

[209] Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun, "Introduction: The Sea is History" in *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Sea* (New York & Londong: Routledge, 2004), 2.

Tumba (figure 51-53), however, she replaced her body (or that of anyone else for that matter) with body bags filled with sand equaling the weight of an average person. Fishermen later threw the bags over the board of a small boat anchored at a short distance from the shore. As a symbolic act, *Tumba* elicits a clear message about the recording of an ephemeral event that turned the Caribbean Sea into a burial site and made it a silent agent in the colonizing enterprise. However, *Tumba* also challenges Barthes's remark, used at the beginning of this chapter, about the sign-less space of the sea by suggesting that the beach—where land originates and from where the performance was observed—is not always the most advantageous point of view. A possible conjecture to this ephemeral work is that to those watching from the shore, the action performed by the men throwing the bags overboard could have been mistaken with the more leisurely act of throwing a fishnet or returning their catch to the water. *Tumba* seeks to invalidate the fallacy that from the steadiness of the land the sea can be fully apprehended.

In the video, the camera angle transitions from shooting from far away to barely floating at sea level to sinking slowly as it captures the body bags also descending to the bottom of the ocean. The view of the camera asks us to confront a construction of time and space that differs from the mythos of maritime enterprises built upon notions of discovery and colonization. That is, in *Tumba* the vertical voyage or sinking is a form of charting a geography that is "materially unmarked by European monuments" and imagined as counter-history by postcolonial islanders.[210] This sinking motion that we follow in *Tumba*—a trace that challenges more horizontal explorations of the aquatic geography of the Caribbean—is informed by Brathwaite's concept of "tidalectics." A

[210] Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 26.

term that borrows from the rhythmic movement of the ocean, Elizabeth DeLoughrey has further described tidalectics as a conceptual tool that "foregrounds alter/native epistemologies to western colonialism and its linear and materialist biases."[211] As such, tidalectics is a dynamic approach to geography that recovers cultural production in the Caribbean that falls outside conventional modes of accounting for history.

The dialectical function of the sea—its tidalectics—is enunciated in *Tumba* from its title. However, to describe the sea as a mere grave would be too simplistic in the context of the Caribbean. In relation to the bodies that have and continue to traverse it, the sea is host, womb, witness, executioner, victim, and tomb.[212] Several scholars have attempted to articulate the metaphoric meaning of the sea in light of all the death it witnessed during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. But it is Glissant's words that speak most loudly about and with the most attention to the poetics and aesthetics of the sea:

> Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers*—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.[213]

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[211] Ibid., 2.

[212] This reading is informed by Marcus Wood's interpretation of not only JW Turner's *The Slave Ship* from 1840 but more specifically of John Ruskin's extended and lengthy analysis about the painting. Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 63.

[213] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

Tying together the whole picture that Glissant paints for us is the color green of the tarnished balls and chains whose reflection now appears refracted onto the wavy surface of the great green expanse that is the Caribbean Sea.[214]

Whether it is the rhythmic movement of the sea or the steady cadence of the human pulse—enlivened, as it is, by a different stream—we are constantly reminded of the relationship between the body and its aqueous medium. Such connection is explored in Quisqueya Henríquez's *Helado de agua del Mar Caribe* (figure 54-56), developed in 2002 for Art Chicago and most recently in 2008 for her mid-career retrospective at the Bronx Museum. In its latest iteration, Henríquez shipped six gallons of seawater from the Dominican Republic, which she turned into ice cream with the help of Delicioso Coco Helado Company from the Bronx. The ice cream, which was offered to museum visitors, could be easily dismissed as nothing more than a sardonic gesture toward the stereotypical view of the Caribbean as a leisurely place—the backyard of the US that treats its visitors to refreshing ice cream. However, I would like to invite a different reading of the role of this sweet delectable in this work.

In the sense that this performance welcomes the consumption and digestion of a portion, albeit small, of the Caribbean Sea, the artist is broadly referencing the long history of food production in the Caribbean. Stuart Hall smartly and pithily referred to the institution behind this food revolution as "the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth."[215] In regard to the production and global distribution of food

[214] Valérie Loichot's recent essay "Édouard Glissant's Graves," *Callaloo* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2013), 1014-1032, is an example of an exciting new scholarly direction for the study of maritime humanities.

[215] Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities; Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, globalization, and the world-system: contemporary conditions for the representation of identity* ed. Anthony D. King (Binghamton: Dept. of Art and Art History, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1991), 48.

from the Caribbean, Mimi Sheller has noted that "food consumption became a particularly powerful point of ethical critique both because it so intimately entered the body of the consumer, and because it so violently impinged upon the bodies of the plantation laborers enslaved to feed the consumer markets."[216] But more specifically, when it comes to turning the Caribbean Sea into an edible food, a more violent reference comes to mind. During the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the swallowing of seawater, and in more fatal cases choking with it, was not an uncommon way for enslaved people to die. Furthermore, the consumption and eventual depletion of Henríquez's Caribbean seawater ice cream also speaks to the tragedy of disappearance. The trauma of death evoked in Henríquez's work is represented in the opposite way of Galindo's performance. While in the latter it is the sea that consumes the body, in the former it is the ingestion of dangerous amounts of water where the vulnerability of the body lies.

One of the main characteristics of contemporary Caribbean art is its ability to coalesce, in non-literal ways, the history of trauma suffered during the Trans-Atlantic crossing known as the Middle Passage and more contemporaneous forms of intra-Caribbean migrations. These stories, as many other scholars have expounded before me, could not be told without considering the central role played by the ocean and sea. Distinctive about works such as Henríquez's *Helado de agua del Mar Caribe* is the way she balances the forces between attraction and repulsion. Knowingly playing with the racially and sexually-laden invitation to come and "taste the tropics," Henríquez's ice cream and the saltwater flavor evocative from the title express a more unsettling side to this otherwise innocuous treat.

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[216] Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, 76.

In her book *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, professor Stephanie Smallwood articulates how the term "saltwater" was once a derogatory name used to refer to recently arrived enslaved Africans. It differentiated the "new comers" from their descendants, now American-born. "In speaking of 'saltwater' origins," Smallwood continues, "they gave a name to the inter-change between the slave ship and the slave community, between the new African migrants continually arriving to take their place alongside the survivors and the American-born children who were putting down tentative roots in the new communities, between the ongoing experience of forced migration and its collective memory."[217] Extrapolated to more contemporary times, the notion of ingesting saltwater flavored ice cream suggests the simultaneous reconstruction of past and present, where the Middle Passage becomes a metaphor through which we can attempt to understand the reality of new forms of perilous migration.

Uncertainty and fragmentation, two words that describe the role of the sea in the cultural formation of the Caribbean, are almost tangible qualities in the 1988 work *Untitled (Warm Waters)* (figure 57) by Cuban-born artist Felix González-Torres. Part of his jigsaw puzzle series, this work was made from a photographic image affixed to a piece of cardboard that was then cut into a standard puzzle and encased in a plastic Ziploc bag—except when on display when the work is delicately pinned to the wall by four tacks. In this particular work, the color blue that is so characteristic in his work stands out as indicative of the Caribbean Sea despite the nondescript title of the image. The blue, in González-Torres's art, is a conceptual decision suffused with biographical elements.

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[217] Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA & London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007), 6.

Three times an exile, first to Spain when he was only nine years old, then to Puerto Rico, and later to Miami, González-Torres mentioned in an interview from 1993—two years after his partner Ross Laycock's passing away and three years before González-Torres's death of AIDS-related complications—that the blue he employs in his work is nothing like Yves Klein's international blue.[218] "It's more like a Giotto blue in the Caribbean—saturated with bright sunlight," he says.[219] And later on adds, "when you go out in the Caribbean sun the colors get very washed out. For me if a beautiful memory could have a color that color would be light blue. There's a lot of positive dialectic, you know, in blues."[220] I would like to stress that this idea of the dialectics of the Caribbean blue in *Untitled (Warm Waters)* elucidates the tensions between the ludic behavior that the work invites (i.e., in assembling the puzzle) and the tenuousness of the puzzle once assembled.

The light blue color, which is so prevalent in González-Torres's oeuvre, can be seen as a palliative element in his life and work, but it is the combination of the hue with the structural form of the puzzle that invites more nuanced interpretations of the relationship between the self the sea. In writing about another great Cuban mind, author and also artist Severo Sarduy, literary scholar Guillermina De Ferrari analyzes the structure of his novel, *Pájaros de la playa* (1993), in connection with the illness suffered by the characters in the book. Understood as AIDS even though in the book it is referred to as "*el mal*" or "the illness," the sickness that has taken over the bodies of the characters

[218] Tim Rollins, Susan Cahan, and Jan Avgikos, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Los Angeles, CA: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 15.

[219] Ibid.

[220] Ibid.

and of the narrator (whose voice appears in the form of a diary) can be read as a self-allegory of the author who was dying of AIDS while writing *Pájaros*. De Ferrari's interpretation of Sarduy's novel as an "HIV-infected text" where "the ravages inflicted on the body by the presentation of disease is represented materially in the fragmentary and elliptical form of their narration" is particularly useful in analyzing González-Torres's *Untitled (Warm Waters)*.[221]

As *Pájaros* did for De Ferrari, the structure of González-Torres's puzzle informs my reading of the work as an ailing body that is, in turn, a surrogate for the ill and broken memory of a body of water. The precariousness of *Untitled (Warm Waters)* suggests that in its disassembled state the work in question represents that of an ill body that even when pieced together still retains signs of scarification. The source of the ailment, besides the HIV-positive diagnosis experienced by the artist and also his partner, is also the broken memories from his childhood and youth. The late scholar José Esteban Muñoz described González-Torres's puzzles as reminders of "the ways in which images form memories and, in turn, memories themselves fall together. They foreground the fact that memory is always about the collection of fragments. The constellation of memory is also made through an active spectator who pushed pieces together, like a child with a puzzle."[222] The piece of blue ocean depicted in *Untitled (Warm Waters)* can be patched together but can very well come apart or be rendered incomplete by having just one of the fragments missing. In the case of his memories of the sea, the artist mentioned once: "I love blue skies. I love blue oceans. Ross and I would spend summers next to a blue body

[221] Guillermina de Ferrari, *Vulnerable States: Bodies of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 65.

[222] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 174.

of water or under clear, Canadian blue skies."[223] More than just anecdotal, this quote lays bare how González-Torres saw himself and Ross in the representation of these two landscapes—very close in color and unified by a horizon line.

The disassembled puzzle pieces of what already is a portion of the sea, not a full picture of it, speaks of a memory that will never, could never be complete. In González-Torres's case, not only did his many exiles interrupt his memories of this watery setting, which he deliberately incorporated into his work especially during the years he lived in Puerto Rico and after, but it was also the HIV-positive diagnosis that Ross received around 1988 and that would eventually lead to his death that shattered the memories they shared together of the blue ocean.[224] This ill artwork, whose two configurations are either in pieces or as a whole but bearing the marks of its previous broken state, becomes a metaphor for the fragmented memories González-Torres has of the sea of his childhood and as an adult with his partner Ross.

4.4 Conceptual Caribbean Sea

For all the material and self-referential aspects the Caribbean Sea holds, there is also an appeal for its conceptual potential to become universal. Works such as the video *Touch* (2002, figure 58) by Janine Antoni from the Bahamas and *El Mar Caribe* (1971, figure 59-62) an installation by Álvaro Barrios from Colombia reference the moment the Caribbean stops being a specific reference point and becomes something larger and more

[223] Rollins, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 17.
[224] In his essay "Felix González-Torres in Puerto Rico: An Image to Reconstruct," *Art Nexus* (December 20005): 2-6, Elvis Fuentes calls the years between 1978 and 1985 "Felix González-Torres's creative period in Puerto Rico." While it is true that the Cuban artist returned to Puerto Rico and made a handful of projects during these years, Fuentes's account is slightly misleading since González-Torres left the island for New York in 1979. According to González-Torres's own chronology he was sent to Spain in 1971 and the to Puerto Rico to live with an uncle. The exact year of arrival to the island remains undetermined.

comprehensive. Both artists use the referent of the Caribbean Sea as a vehicle that propels this idea forward. Through the use of the trope of the horizon in Antoni's case and the language of Minimalism in Barrio's installation, both artists seek to inscribe the Caribbean in the larger narratives of contemporary art from the positionality of the sea.

Antoni's video *Touch* from 2002 is one of the few works that addresses her Caribbean birthplace. Born in Freeport, Bahamas, in 1964, from Trinidadian parents, she attended boarding school in Florida in 1977 for high school. After graduating from Sarah Lawrence with a bachelor's degree, Antoni then went to Japan for a few months to work at an artist's studio before returning to the Bahamas. In the late 1980s she went back to the US to pursue an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design from where she graduated in 1989. Going back to the Bahamas to shoot and produce *Touch* meant returning to the island of her childhood where, as she recalls, began her interest in the procedural and her relationship with sensuous, physical, and visceral materials.[225]

In *Touch*, which Antoni made for SITE Santa Fe 2002, we see a perfectly beautiful seascape—a short shore, the water, the horizon line, and the sky make up this picturesque composition. Just above the horizon line, a tightrope extends the length of the video frame. After a couple of seconds of facing a desolate view, Antoni then enters the frame by walking on the tightrope. As she carefully balances herself, we see the wire dip ever so slightly until it reaches a point of tension, near the center of the frame, where the tightrope meets the horizon line and it appears as if Antoni were walking on top of the water. In an interview for *Art in America* published in 2009, Antoni describes the

[225] Douglas Dreishpoon, "Janine Antoni," Art in America, last modified October 23, 2009, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/janine-antoni/

technical side of *Touch* and its aim at delivering the visual effect of walking along the horizon:

> *Touch* [a video produced in the Bahamas in 2002] is one of the few pieces that directly addresses my relationship to both the landscape and my childhood home. The video was filmed on the seashore in front of that home on the island of Grand Bahama. In it, I walk back and forth across a wire that is parallel to but slightly above the horizon. As I walk, the wire dips to touch the horizon. I balance there for a brief moment. This ocean's horizon was what I looked out at through most of my childhood, and the image is deeply imprinted in my memory. I can still hear my mother saying, "Janine, you must go out and see the world, because this place that we come from is behind God's back." The horizon seemed to be the edge between our forgotten island and the world out there. I always thought of the horizon as a line that could not be pinpointed or in any way fixed; as you move toward it, it constantly recedes. I was drawn back to this impossible place. I wanted to walk along this line, which was essentially the line of my vision, the edge of my imagination.[226]

This lengthy quote is rich in allusions to a place that has been forgotten and that falls outside the purview of normative frames of visibility (e.g., "behind God's back," "edge between our forgotten island and the world out there," "impossible place"). Antoni's words raise the question that I will attempt to answer in this section: why is the shore not an adequate enough place from where to ponder these issues? And why does she enter this undefined space? Why is the horizon line a vantage point that needs addressing?

It is worth emphasizing that Antoni could have chosen the horizon line that separates the earth—as in any piece of land whether in the Bahamas or elsewhere—and the sky. Instead, she chose to explore that apparent line created by the meeting of the sea and the firmament. The verticality of her body and the horizontal movement across the tightrope represent the defeat of an impossible feat. Described as "the imaginary plane

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[226] Ibid.

that passes through the center of the Earth, perpendicular to its radius,"[227] the horizon line is an optical illusion; there is no real meeting of the sky with the earth or the sea, no real point where these two unite. Despite its existence as a visual effect only, Antoni resorts to a visual trick to defy the impossible act of walking across a line that does not actually exist.

As a critically acclaimed artist in the circuits of contemporary art, I interpret Antoni's opinion that "the horizon seemed to be the edge between our forgotten island and the world out there" and her decision to shoot *Touch* in "the seashore in front" (not in the "backyard" as many would refer to the beaches in the region) of her childhood home as an example of identity politics and conceptual art in the Caribbean.[228] I believe the larger point of this work is linked to Charles Harrison's argument that "the positioning of a horizon is always relative to the composition of pictorial space and to the establishment of pictorial illusion. That is, it is relative to some notional viewpoint and to some intended effect."[229] In this case, the intended effect is to irrupt into a space that has not been traversed before, because of its physical impossibility, and materialize it for the sake of Caribbean art. The act of walking across the horizon line is for Antoni a way of

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[227] *National Geographic*, s.v. "Horizon," http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/encyclopedia/horizon/?ar_a=1.

[228] In her dissertation, Erica Moiah James argues that, besides Camille Pisarro (born in St Thomas in 1830), no other artist's has received so much critical acclaim and so little mention of the role the Caribbean plays in her work as Janine Antoni: "It would not be hyperbole to suggest that not since Camille Pissarro in the mid nineteenth century has an artist born and raised in the Caribbean received as much attention in international art circles as Janine Antoni. However for both Pissarro and Antoni the Caribbean is absent from the discourse on their work." James, "Re-Worlding the World: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2008), 188. ProQuest (UMI 3383513).

[229] Charles Harrison, "The Effects of Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, 2nd ed. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 220.

bridging the "forgotten island" of her Caribbean childhood to the "world out there" of her adult life as a much-admired global artist.

At this point I would like to gesture back to Felix González-Torres's quote of his memories of spending time with Ross next to a body of water or under Canadian blue skies. What I appreciate about this reminiscence is that in, typical González-Torres's fashion, his references to his relationship with Ross evoke unity, completeness, and totality. Together, these two vast and expansive landscapes can signify the whole. Rosalind Krauss reminds us of this when she mentions: "The sea and sky are a way of packaging 'the world' as a totalized image, as a picture of completeness, as a field constituted by the logic of its own frame."[230] Admittedly, this was a problem for Krauss who, in her book *The Optical Unconscious*, refuted the "ocularcentrism" endorsed by Clement Greenberg because it did not account for what laid outside of pure optical vision (i.e., the unconscious). But, for Antoni, too, this image of the seashore where she grew up, the one "behind God's back," must be intervened and interrupted. The horizon in *Touch* is attainable.

The link made by these two artists, Antoni and González-Torres, between the regional waters of their youth and the "world out there" or sky that completes the whole picture was an aesthetic preoccupation originally broached in the early 1970s. For the 7th Paris Biennial of 1971, Colombian artist Álvaro Barrios exhibited 125 silkscreens as part of his installation *El Mar Caribe*. Hanging from clothespins, the silkscreens were arranged into rows and placed in a space where passersby can view the installation from all sides. Each silkscreen was printed recto-verso with a cyan-colored square occupying

[230] Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994), 12.

most of the space. In the footer of the silkscreens are inscribed the longitudes and latitudes of a section of the Caribbean Sea. Together, the 125 prints constitute a fragmented view of a marine map of the sea.

The work, which has rarely been exhibited save for a few times after its 1971 installation in Paris, belongs to FRAC Lorraine's collection. On their website, an insightful write-up enlightens the understanding of this artwork:

> The cartographic fiction has been defeated: the spatial environment breaks up the integrity, the flatness, and the frontality which turned the planisphere into an intelligible image. The cartographer's aggressive and authoritative grid is burst into pieces on the ceiling. The prints are suspended on strings and held by clothes clips as in some gigantic laundry room where one would wait for all the water to finally evaporate.[231]

This description alludes to a Caribbean unity that has been segmented and that, when left hanging from a clothesline, can result in the eventual depletion and drying up of meaning. However, the positioning of the silkscreens suggests more than just a sea that has been left to dry in the sun. By placing the prints above the heads of the passersby, Barrios is commenting on the sea-sky connection and on how a specific region can be propelled into occupying a space in the wider network of contemporary art.

In *El Mar Caribe*, the divide between sea and sky is obliterated. The spectators who walk under the installation are automatically entering a space that privileges the viewpoint of the Caribbean Sea, which has now been transposed to occupy the space of the sky. I see this motion as a way in which the specificity of the Caribbean becomes a universalized landscape by using the languages of minimalism and conceptual art. The huge expanse of both the Caribbean Sea and the sky are broken into a perfectly square monochrome swatch. The presence of geodesic coordinates at the foot of each silkscreen

[231] Hélène Meisel, "Álvaro Barrios: *El Mar Caribe*," FRAC Lorraine, http://collection.fraclorraine.org/collection/print/767?lang=en.

point to the impersonal and objective vocabulary of minimalism, just as the density of these two broad landscapes has been flattened and neatly segmented. Also suggestive of minimalist art (or of a transgressive attitude toward it) is the movement from floor to ceiling; while Carl André's floor arrangements aggressively occupied the egalitarian space of passersby, Barrio's suspended installation is welcoming of incursions into the ecologies of sea and sky.

By raising the artwork from the ground to the ceiling, yet retaining the name of Caribbean Sea in the title, Barrios experimented with expanding this seascape into a skyscape. As with Antoni, the body of water that hugs the coast of the city where he was born—Cartagena, Colombia—becomes a moving metaphor for the aesthetic possibilities of a region whose visibility has been typically relegated to the margins. It is neither an "impossible place" nor "behind God's back," as Antoni was explained to as a child. The Caribbean Sea is a projection, refracted on to the sky and spoken about in the language of contemporary art.

The analysis of these two artworks and the proposed link between the sea and the firmament above encompass a process of worlding, or better yet of *sea*ing, of the discourses of global contemporary art. By opening up the space of the sea to a larger consideration of other, more universal and general spaces, Antoni and Barrios are charting a territory for Caribbean art that dialogues on a relational level with Anglo and European art traditions. I am, of course, using Spivak's term of worlding in a somewhat different way from how she interpreted, in turn, from Heidegger in 1985. While worlding is a term that describes the ways in which colonized space is brought to "exist" within the world of the colonizer, I posit *sea*ing as a preferred concept for defining a perspective

whose emphasis is on and from the sea and which aims to map previously charted art histories vis-à-vis the arts from littoral societies.[232] It is my hope that by introducing the idea of *sea*ing we can push the conversation toward what Glissant called a "poetics of relation" that will foster the inclusion of spaces such as the Caribbean, and that had been inadequately accounted for in the history of art, into a broader and more fluid seascape of the visual arts. This is the *Conditio Caribbeana* to be elaborated in detail in the conclusion of this thesis.

In discussing these seven examples of art from or about the Caribbean, I have attempted to illustrate the Caribbean Sea's signifying potential. As a marginal space to the more venerable sign-filled space of the land, the sea bears other signs beyond the playful and the leisurely. The artworks discussed assert a Caribbean sense of "seaing" as a lens that explains the role played by the sea in colonial times but also its position in the contemporary world. Works that analyze the spatial economy of the sea privilege a state of flux without occluding the pains and traumas tied to the historical specificity of the region's past and present. From the addictive sway of the waves that reveals the aesthetic attraction and repulsion of this body of water, the different meanings of the sea start to come afloat.

[232] For Spivak's use of the concept of *worlding* see: "The Rani of Simur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (Oct. 1985): 247-272.

Conclusion:
Conditio Caribbeana

> Creolity assumes imperfection, even as it assures the survival of a rough future.
> -Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak[233]

> The Caribbean, as far as I am concerned, may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation presents itself most visibly, one of the explosive regions where it seems to be gathering strength.
> -Édouard Glissant[234]

I first encountered the phrase "*conditio Caribbeana*" in Stephan Palmié's anthropological study "Creolization and its Discontents," which examines the proliferation phenomenon of the concept of creolization. He clarifies his position when he states that the "unreflexive use of it is neither defensible on empirical grounds nor theoretically well advised" and proceeds, in an acerbic tone, to claim that the "*conditio humana*" has been now replaced by a Caribbean condition.[235] While I share Palmié's healthy dose of skepticism toward what I see as an uncritical and indiscriminate use of the term, particularly in the realm of arts, I can also perceive in the phrase *conditio Caribbeana* a second meaning: condition as the state in which the world exists but also as a proviso or stipulation that requires diffraction and entanglement.

Woven between both meanings, Caribbean condition also suggests a poetics of relation—duality with the promise for multiplicity. In the context that concerns this dissertation, the field of art history, a poetics of relation stands against the discourse of the single source, of purity, and of origins. By anchoring the focus of this thesis on the

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[233] Spivak, "World Systems & the Creole," *Narrative* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 110.

[234] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 33.

[235] Stephan Palmié, "Creolization and its Discontents," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 433-434.

visual arts of the Caribbean I have aimed to open analytic paths to be "mapped over the relational topologies of global and local spaces and double articulated within diasporic traditions or habituses, but going beyond them as well."[236] Thus, in these final pages, I want to turn the attention to possible directions for the study of creolization in the arts as it particularly concerns the Caribbean.

At the end of the last chapter, I concluded my analysis of the signifying potential of the Caribbean Sea with a reflection, or better yet a projection, of how the Caribbean can have far reaching applicability without losing its specific referent. Specifically, I posited how the modes of representation in Janine Antoni's *Touch* and Álvaro Barrio's *Mar Caribe* lend themselves to become propelled from the specific segments of the Caribbean Sea that they allude to in their works to wider circuits of global art. In this final section I want to elaborate on the notion of the applicability of local and specific examples to global and universal discourses of art by looking at Glissant's concept of *poetics of relation* through one last artwork: Tavares Strachan's *Who Deserves Aquamarine, Black, and Gold* (2005-2013, figure 63).

In 2005, Bahamian-born artist Strachan journeyed to the Alaskan Arctic for a project he titled *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want (Arctic Ice Project)*. Assisted by a team, Strachan extracted a four and half ton section of a frozen river, which was then shipped to Nassau, Bahamas. The ice sculpture was subsequently exhibited there in 2006 and later at the Brooklyn Museum in 2009. For the exhibition in the Bahamas, the ice block was kept in a glass freezer powered from a solar energy cell;

[236] Michaeline A. Crichlow and Patricia Northover, *Globalization and the Post-Creole Imagination: Notes on Fleeing the Plantation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 175.

the heat produced by the Caribbean sun was, paradoxically, what kept the Arctic ice from melting.

Another component of *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want (Arctic Ice Project)* was a video shot and a series of photographs taken of Strachan planting a flag somewhere in the Alaskan side of the Arctic Circle. Emblazoned with the colors of the Bahamian flag, Strachan's banner differed in the design. His has an embroidered letter T on the upper left side corner of the diagonally divided flag, and a gold star on the bottom right side corner. The concept for the flag was taken from US Admiral Robert Peary's personal flag, which he used during the dogsled expedition to the North Pole in 1909 (figure 64 and 65). As history has come to tell us, the great achievement of being the first American to reach the North Pole has been a claim that first went to Peary but has now been revised to reflect more accurately the role of African American explorer Matthew Henson as the first one to discover the geographic North Pole.[237]

Adorned with the letter T for Tavares in the same part of the flag where the P for Peary was located, Strachan's flag was once again used in his expedition to the North Pole to gather the objects and materials that make up his *Polar Eclipse* exhibition still on view at the most recent 55th Venice Biennale, where Strachan was the sole artist invited to participate in the Bahamian National Pavilion. I have chosen Strachan's flag, which has been part of his artistic repertoire since 2005, for my closing statement because it

[237] Strachan was not the first artist to reference the history of the discovery of the North Pole and the role played by Matthew Henson. In 1986, artist Robert Colescott painted *Matthew Henson and the Quest for the North Pole* where he sought to call attention to the injustice served by a version of history that for years excised the figure of Henson and, in turn, heightened the character of Robert Peary who was white.

enunciates the tension between the local and the global, the singular and the general, that is implicit in Glissant's concept of relation.

Flags in contemporary art are seen as quintessential emblems of national and cultural pride so laden with political meaning that the artistic gesture almost becomes empty of meaning. Take for instance the case of American artist Jasper Johns's painting conveniently titled *Flag* (1954-1955). No matter how it is represented, what variations or techniques mark it, the flag regardless of its execution will always be the flag. The connection between the signifier (American flag) and the signified (the rectangle with white and blue stripes and 48 white stars over a blue background) is so tight that is difficult to see the arbitrariness of this sign. Put in a different way, flags are the opposite of empty signifiers; they are loaded with extra-pictorial meaning suggestive of patriotism, hegemony, political chauvinism, conquest, independence, and pride, among other adjectives.

In the case of Strachan's flag used twice in the Alaska section of the Arctic Circle and in the North Pole, the elements that constitute the flag paired with the other features that make up the documentation of the artwork imbue the banner with a purpose of arrival, exploration, and conquest. The photographs and video that evidence these two moments show the artist dressed in thick anoraks, matching trekking boots, black mittens, and surrounded by mounds and craters of snow. He carries in his hands the Tavares-Bahamian-Peary flag, for lack of a better descriptor, which he then plants in the solid white snow. The moment is reminiscent of so many geological, nautical, and spatial expeditions with the variant that the flags that are most commonly seen in moments like these are those of nations such as the United States, Russia, or China. To see the flag

representative of a young Caribbean nation planted in the snow is almost a comical gesture.[238] Moreover, the sight of an Afro-Caribbean person in the tundra and not in the more familiar landscape of beaches and palm trees also adds a strange dose of humor to the photographs.[239]

Trinidadian art historian Patricia Mohammed argues that "coats of arms, crests, flags and other trappings are taken-for-granted symbols in the political life of new Caribbean states, as well as in the public performance of nationalisms."[240] In this particular performance, transposing a flag representative of the Bahamas to a vastly different setting tones down the nationalist impulse. Even if Strachan's gesture is evocative of those milestone moments that mark the history of first world countries, this one-man excursion is less about nationalism as it is about connecting the colonial history of voyages in the Caribbean with the history of an Afro-Diasporic man, Matthew Henson, whose rightful place in the history of the North Pole expedition was not acknowledged until recently.[241] This turn from culturally specific representations to the creation of

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[238] The Bahamas became independent from Great Britain in 1973 and this same year adopted a new flag that consists of a black triangle situated at the hoist and with three horizontal bands, two aquamarine and one yellow.

[239] Another Caribbean flag that was displayed in almost arctic conditions was that of Jamaica. In 2010 and 2014, Newton Marshall, a Jamaican professional musher (dogsled driver), made headlines when he competed and completed the Iditarod race in Alaska, a 1,100-mile race from Willow to Nome, considered to be one of the toughest races in the world. In 2010, Marshall competed for the first time finishing in 47th place by making a time of 12 days, 4 hours, 27 minutes, and 28 seconds. He bettered his time in 2014 when he came in 43rd place after finishing the race in 12 days, 1 hour, 5 minutes, and 52 seconds.

[240] Patricia Mohammed, "Taking Possession: Symbols of Empire and Nationhood," *Small Axe*, no. 11 (March 2002): 31.

[241] To this we can add a third thread of history referenced in Strachan's work; that is, the exploratory role the Caribbean has played in the history of geological, nautical, and air and space-related expeditions. Mimi Sheller has gone as far as to say that "while the Caribbean usually appears as an afterthought in the history of science and technology, it significantly haunts the footnotes of the Space Age." She goes on to list several examples: In 1961 US astronaut Virgil "Gus" Grissom infamously ended his 15-minute suborbital flight with the accidental sinking of his capsule Liberty Bell 7 in the Atlantic Ocean off of Grand Bahama Island; in 1962 the first two Americans to orbit the earth, John Glenn and Scott Carpenter, splashed down

transversal links between times, places, and people—or what Paul Gilroy calls "diasporic intimacy"—is in my view a method of becoming creolized. This particular view of how contemporary art can strive to enter the process of creolization resonates with Glissant's poetics of relation.

What does relation propose to do for the study of contemporary Caribbean art? Glissant's poetic is above all the opposite of a discourse. It resists the dogmatic impulse that has been the legacy of colonization imposed on every realm of Caribbean life. As a poetic, it stands against any linear readings of time and space and pushes, instead, for the articulation of relational histories at different moments and from diverse locations. And while the aim of relation is shared knowledge, the point of departure is the abyss experienced by enslaved Africans upon being brought to the Americas. "This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange," pronounces Glissant in the first pages of his book before continuing, "We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone."[242] Hence, relation is the promise for the forced voyage to turn into a continuum with no certain path and no prescribed itinerary.

In relation, too, the singularities of nationality, language, and ethnicity are at odds with the idea of the multiple. As such, the local and the global are in constant negotiation. In her writing about Strachan's *Who Deserves Aquamarine, Black, and Gold*, Mimi Sheller has touched upon this aspect when she mentions: "Here a claim to territory (and national identity) is in tension with the pull outward to explore the distant reaches of the

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in the Atlantic Ocean close to the Turks and Caicos Islands and were brought to the US Air Force Base on Grand Turk for debriefing; in 2009 Joseph Michael Acaba was the first NASA astronaut of Puerto Rican origin to deliver the final set of solar arrays to the International Space Station. Sheller, "How To Be Seen While Unseen: Finding the Un-Visible Bahamas in the (Dis)assembled Works of Tavares Strachan," *emisférica* 12, no. 1 (2015): n.p.

[242] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 8-9.

world, to leave home, and to move between incompatible climactic zones: a perennial Caribbean dilemma. To what ends of the earth will the Caribbean explore, or explode?"[243] This wrestling between what is known and specific and what is uncertain and foreign is what relation can bring to the future of creolization.

It is hard not to see how tempting these ideas are for the construction of a discourse of art that is multipurpose and can fit as many disparate examples as possible. One of the latest attempts is Nicolas Bourriaud's *The Radicant*, a treatise that proposes to reconstruct the modern for the specific context in which we are living.[244] His discussion of the *altermodern* and its catalytic agent, the *radicant*—the two operative terms he develops in the book—includes a pastiche of different ideas culled from diverse sources. From Glissant, for instance, he borrows the concept of creolization, which he describes as "a joyous practice of grafting, a productivity engine fueled by the cultural encounter that colonization enabled with its act of breaking and entering, in the postcolonial reflux…"[245] And immediately adds, "Beyond the Caribbean, creolization functions today as a conceptual model whose figures could constitute the basis of a globalized modernity, a weapon against cultural standardization."[246] This shallow use of creolization to explain the *altermodern* project (or twenty-first century modernity constructed on a global scale) glosses over the specific Caribbean referents. As Glissant also said: "creolizations bring

[243] Sheller, "How To Be Seen While Unseen," n.p.

[244] Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009).

[245] Ibid., 76.

[246] Ibid.

into Relation but not to universalize."[247]

In Bourriaud's sense of creolization, the landscape of signs will be mined by "semionauts" or "nomadic sign gatherers," which he calls the "dominant figures of contemporary culture," who will inhabit "a fragmented world in which objects and forms leave the beds of their original cultures and disperse across the planet, they wander in search of connections to establish."[248] Contrary to this romantic notion of creolization, what artists such as Strachan try to accomplish is to restore that Caribbean referent by tugging along a network of histories. From the tundra of the North Pole, Strachan's exploration represents one more frontier in a legacy of voyages that have marked the history of the Caribbean.

It is not enough to argue, as Bourriaud does, that creolization is part of what he sees as the contemporary conditions of globalization. In fact, taking the Caribbean out of the equation of creolization replicates the same positivist attitude toward knowledge as that of modernity. What the idea of the *altermodern* glosses over are, indeed, the instruments that play the crucial part of instigating the changes in contemporary times. As theoretical works in their own right, the works discussed in the pages of this dissertation allow us to see creolization in practice. To think about the visual arts of the Caribbean as a poetics of relation, is to further grapple with the element of the unknown—what Glissant called *opacité*—and to give up the impulse to follow a determined narrative.

I have wrestled with the exercise of thinking through and about the Caribbean from different cities around the globe. In the period that has taken me to complete this

[247] As an aside, Bourriaud's portmanteau concept of "altermodern" had already been preceded by Michel-Rolph Trouillot's term "alter-Native modernities" in Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 89.

[248] Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, 39, 51, and 102.

thesis I have lived in Madison, Wisconsin, Houston, Texas, and Los Angeles, California. Because thinking is as much a part of writing as writing is of thinking, the challenges presented by this dissertation have also extended to diverse a place as San Juan, Puerto Rico, São Paulo, Brazil, and Beijing, China. If something has been clear about this process is that there is not one vantage point from where the complicated history of trauma and colonization in the Caribbean becomes obvious or apparent. As a region that gained notoriety in the cultural field for theories that sought to make sense of the abuses committed in the modern era, it does not follow that now it is being co-opted as an aspirational goal in the *altermodern* project, no matter how multi- or heterogeneous it purports to be. As a never-ending signifier, the Caribbean has been mistaken for being soluble, a dissipating entity at the mercy of the global world. My intention in these pages has been to analyze Caribbean art practice as an agent that theorizes from its own position its very role within the contemporary.

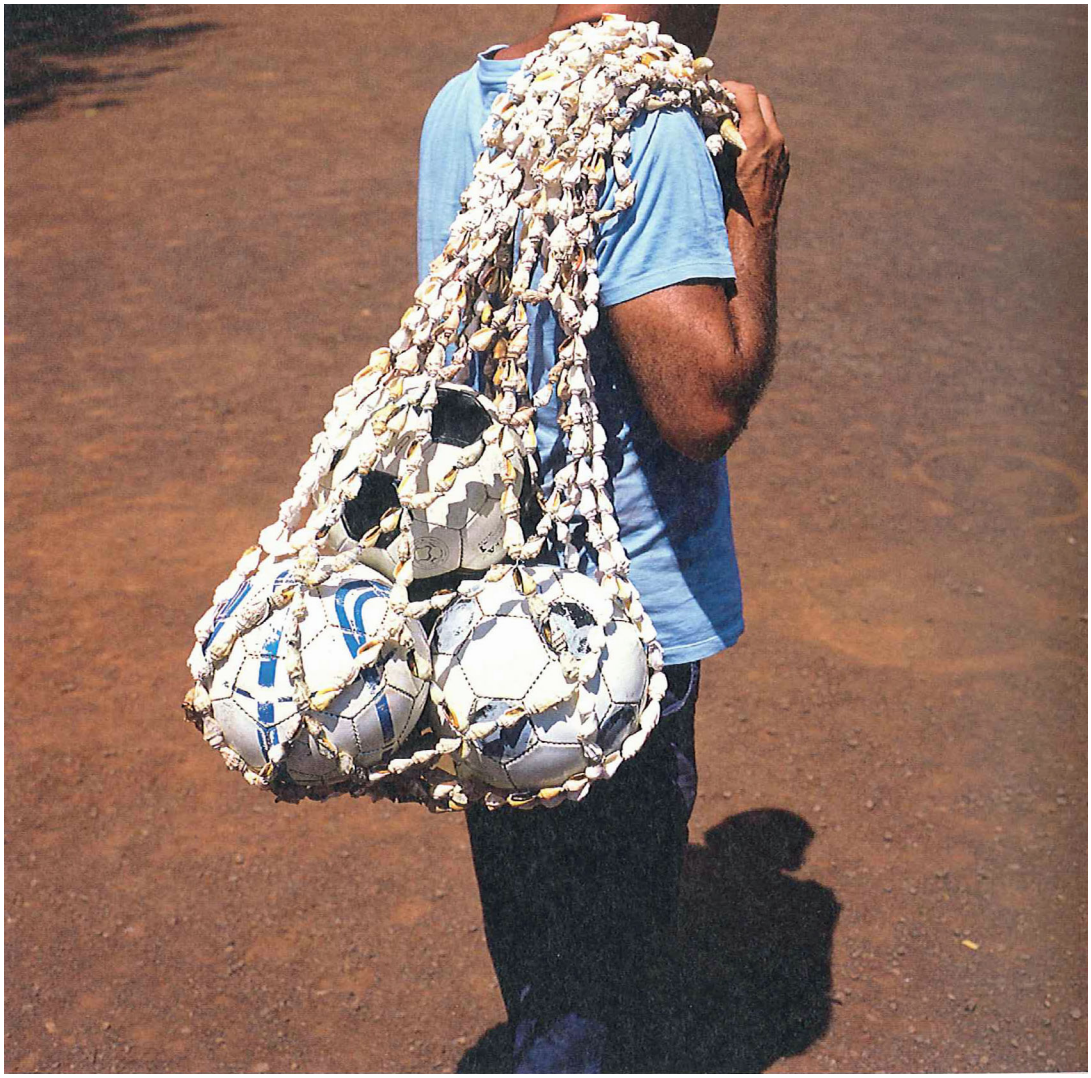


Figure 1. Thierry Fontaine, *basket, La Réunion*, 2006. Photograph, 63 x 63 in.

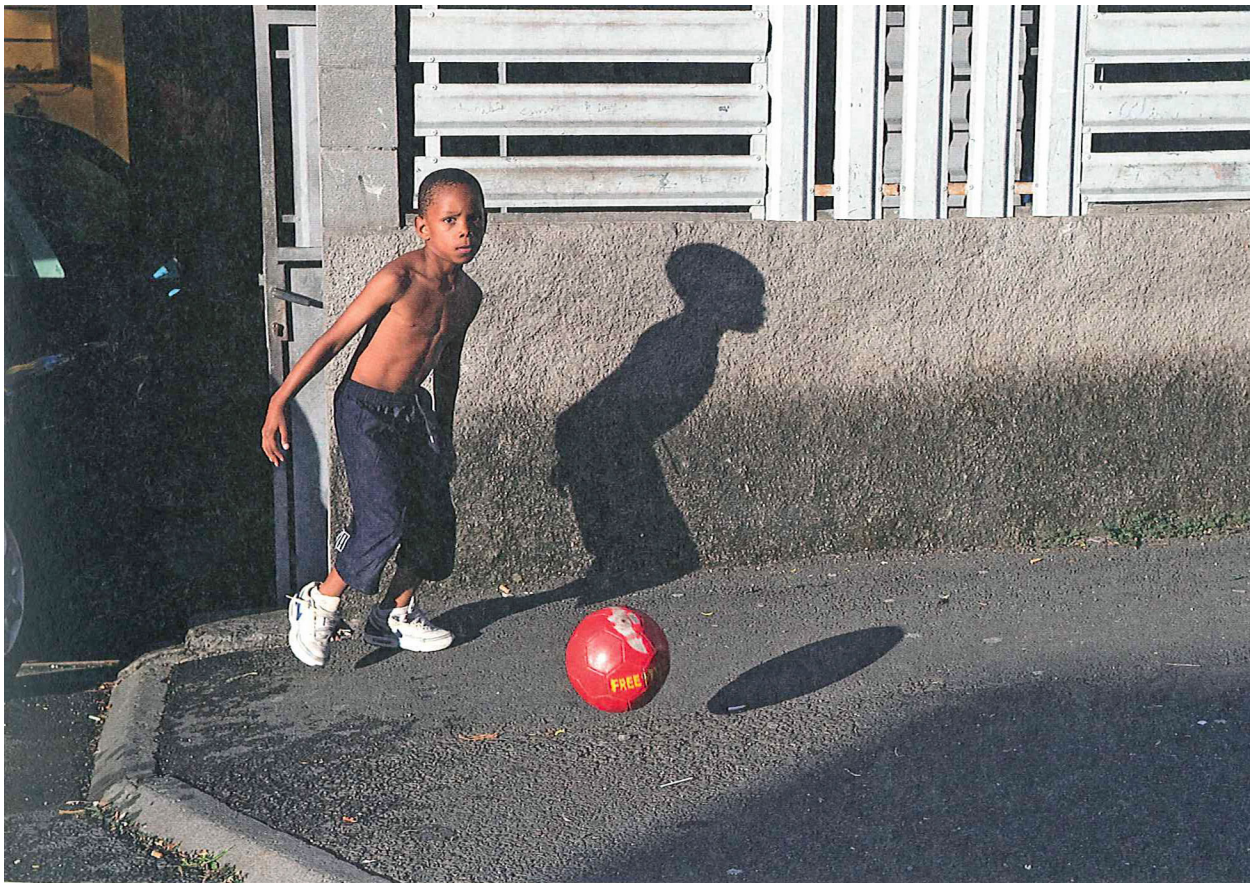


Figure 2. Pierrot Men, *La Réunion*, 2008. Photograph, Commande du Parc de la Villete.

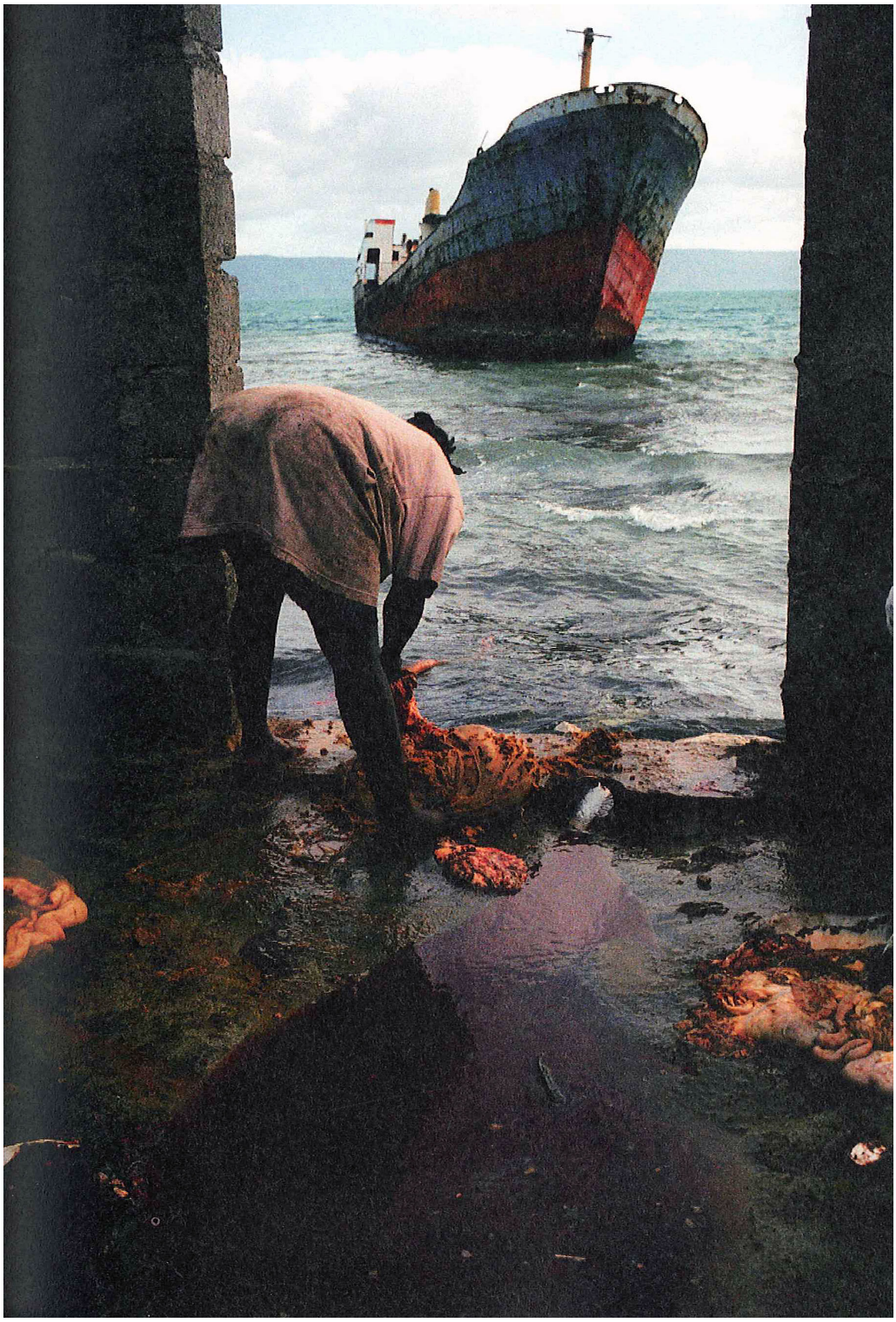


Figure 3. Jane Evelyn Atwood, *Haiti*, 2005-2007. Photograph.

Figure 4. Sentier, *Assemblage-Maison: les enfants s'en vont*, 2008.
Mixed media, 59 x 37 x 58 in.

Figure 5. Isaac Mendes Belisario, "Jaw-Bone, or House John Canoe" (detail) from *Sketches of Character*, part one, 1837, hand-colored lithographs.
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

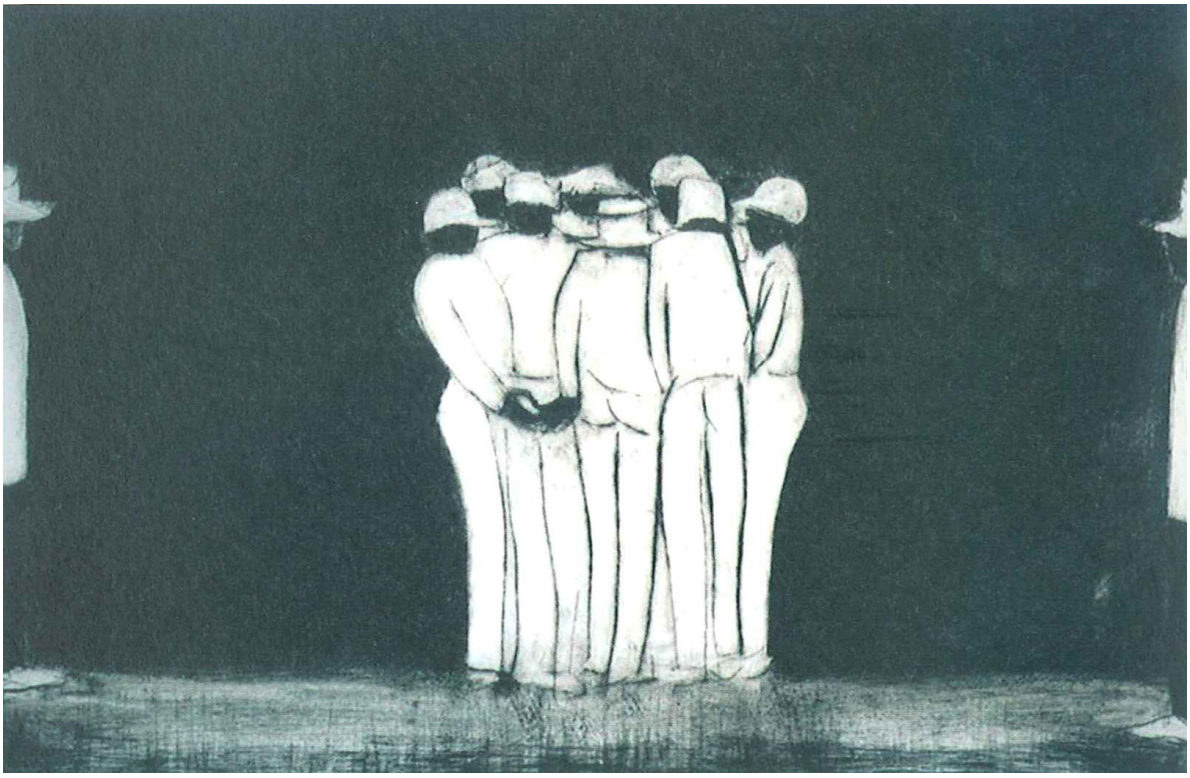


Figure 6. Wendy Nanan, *The Huddle*, 2004. Etching, 44 x 52 cm.
Collection of the artist.

Figure 7. Wendy Nanan, *The Midwicket Bounce*, 2003.
Ink and drawing on pencil, 44 x 52 cm. Collection of the artist.

Figure 8. Wendy Nanan, *Field of Play I*, 2006. Watercolor, 44 x 52 cm. Collection of the artist.

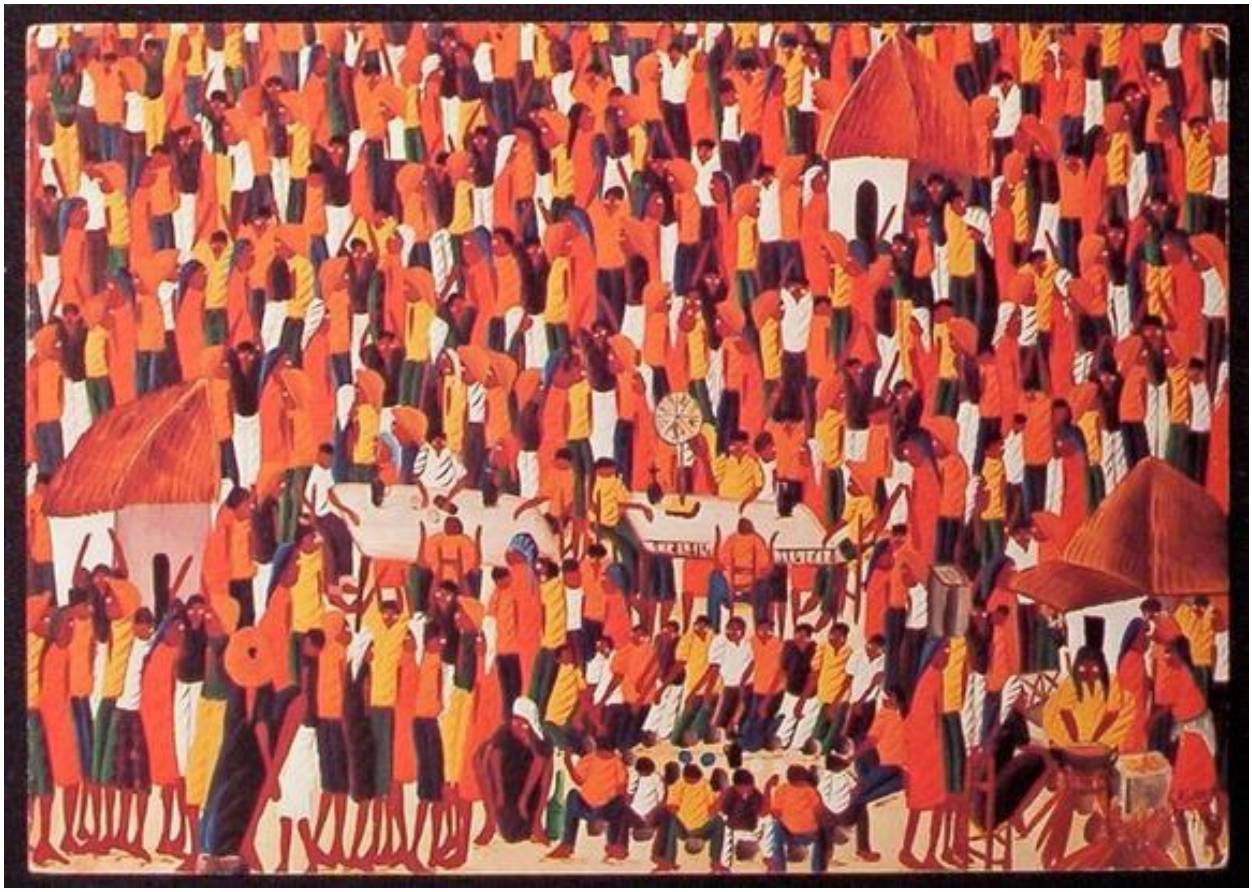


Figure 9. Casimir Laurent, *Fête Créole*, n.d. 9 ½ x 12 ½ in.

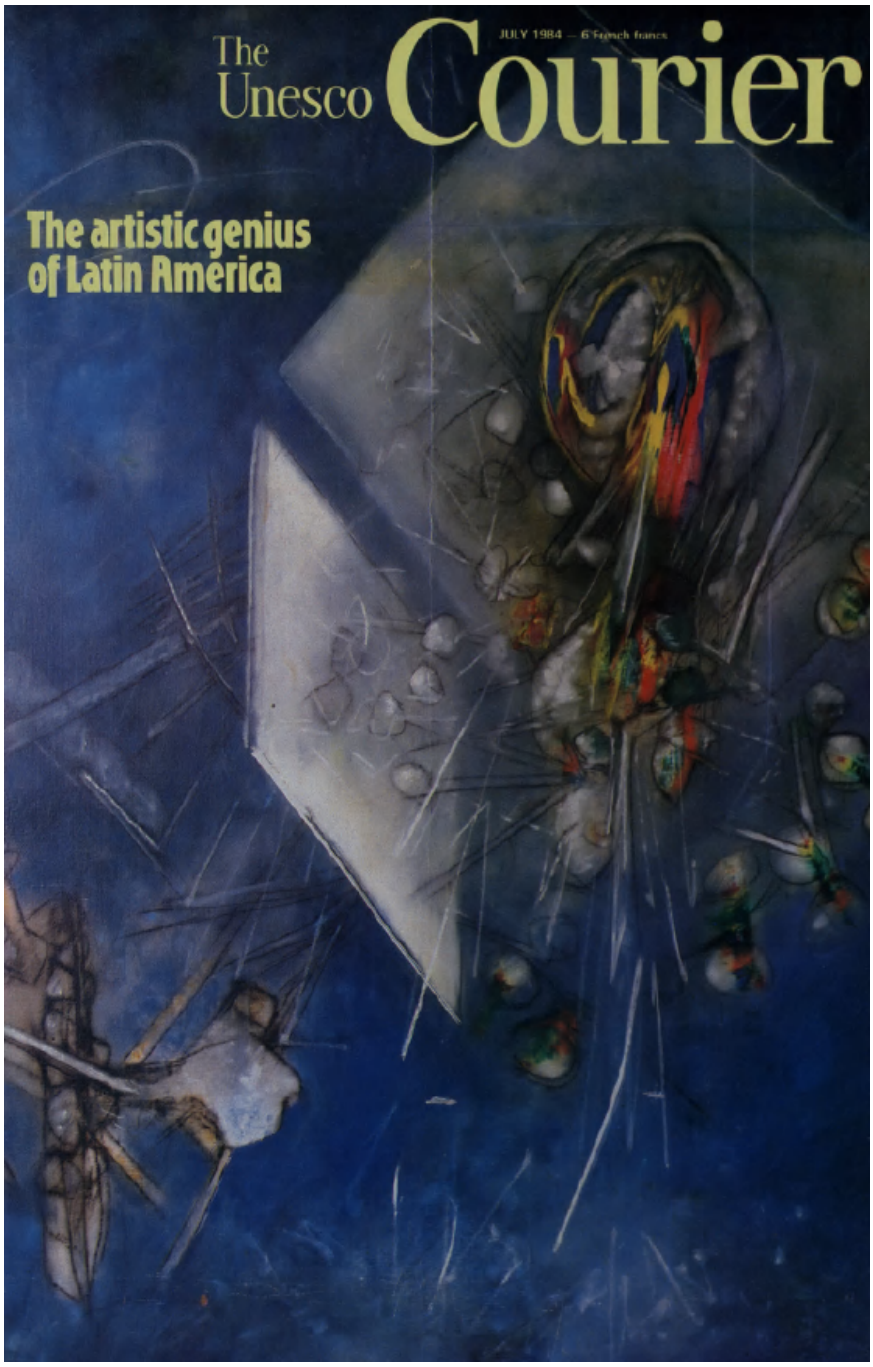


Figure 10. Cover of *The Courier*, July 1984.

Creative contradictions

The Caribbean genius has given birth to a new civilization

Figure 11. Édouard Glissant, "Creative Contradictions: The Caribbean Genius has Given Birth to a New Civilization," *The Courier*, December 1981, 32-35.

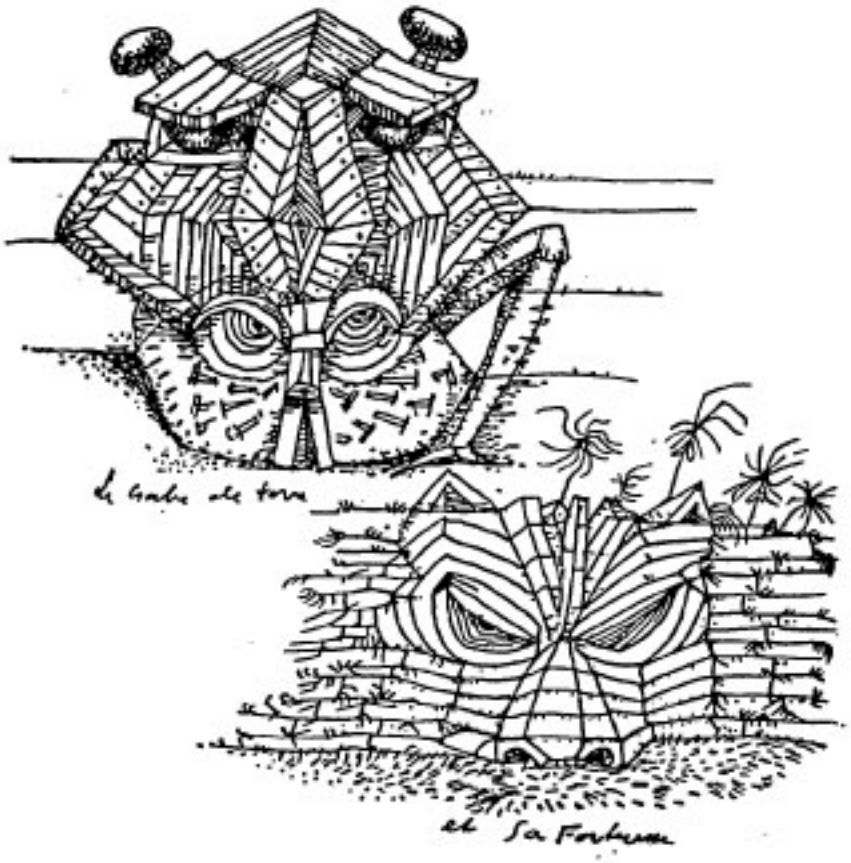
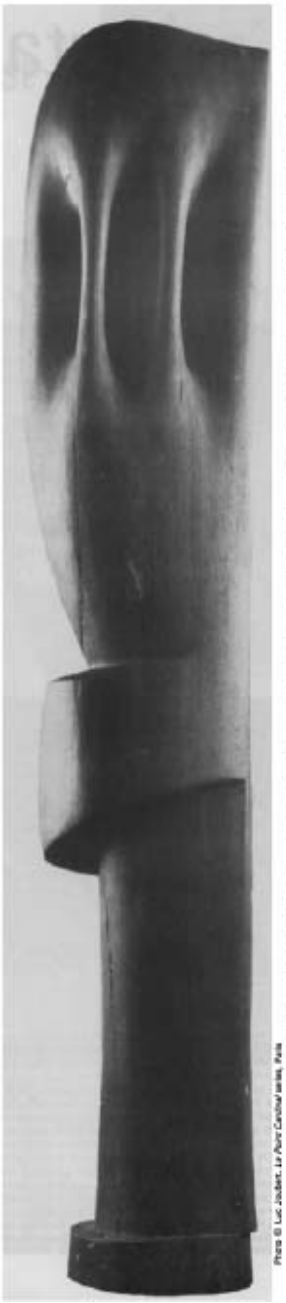


Figure 12. Drawing by André Masson in André Breton,
Martinique Charmeuse de Serpents (Paris: JJ Pauvert, 1972).

Figure 13. Artist Unknown, Woman of Martinique, n.d. Published in *The Courier*, December 1981, 34.

Figure 14. Drawing by André Masson in André Breton, *Martinique Charmeuse de Serpents* (Paris: JJ Pauvert, 1972).



Striding barefoot on the bare earth, this woman of Martinique instinctively adjusts her movements to maintain the poise of her head. On the cloth pad above her brow, for all the world to see, is the daily fare: her baskets are laden with modest treasures of poverty and dignity. Women have borne many things across the Caribbean: stones for the roads, coal from mysterious cargo boats, fruit and vegetables, the trials of everyday life, and the future of their children.

This work in ebony by the great Cuban sculptor Agustín Cárdenas is entitled *El Quarto Famba 1* (1973), the name of the secluded place where new members, chosen for their fidelity to the traditions of the continent from which they had been taken, were initiated into a secret society for Cubans of African origin. Cárdenas has produced such tall wooden totems, like black flames leaping from the African fire which glows in the Antillean consciousness, since his early days as a sculptor. Their form, expressive of both serenity and torment, marks the eruption into modern art of sensibilities which have not found artistic expression since the heyday of African sculpture. These airy, smoothly-finished works typify the contact between cultures that has inspired Cárdenas' work in wood and marble, and show how an artist can draw profound inspiration from his roots yet also practise the boldest experimentation, in an art that is both affirmation and discovery.

the structures of the Caribbean countries cover the whole spectrum. And yet Antillean cultures have never gone so far in pooling their specific features nor communicated so much in terms of a single diversified conception of man.

This conception has culminated in Creolization, which is, as its etymology attests, an ambiguous phenomenon. Is the Creole a White who lives in the Antilles, a White born in the Antilles, or the descendant of an African? A long history of hesitation surrounds this question. Creolization is not a simple process of acculturation: it involves original features, in some cases the product of barely reconcilable contradictions, the chief of which, apart from ways of life and cultural syncretism, may lie in variants of language.

This phenomenon affects the languages which have been imported into the region, and which, as I have said, are sometimes used in very special way. But its most extreme expression lies in the diversity of pidgins and especially in the existence of the Creole language, a language of compromise, a language forged within the Plantation, which the Antillean people adopted in Haiti, in Martinique and Guadeloupe, in Cayenne, Saint Lucia, and Dominica.

Today this folk language is disappearing in Trinidad and Jamaica, and it has never been spoken in the Spanish-speaking Antilles. Nonetheless, the world's tens of millions of Creole speakers (including, as the result of a strange and significant socio-historical phenomenon, the inhabitants of Réunion and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean) can now envisage a renaissance for their mother tongue, a renaissance admittedly threatened by the technological weight of the world's dominant languages.

The fact that the same Creole language is spoken by the English-speaking peoples of the Lesser Antilles is sufficient proof that it has nothing to do with the patois formed from the major languages, to which there have often been attempts to reduce the compromise languages which emerged in the context of colonization. Creole is not a deformation of French, from which its syntax, reputedly of African origin, is totally alien.

Thus, in the present world configuration, the Caribbean stands forth as a special setting in which nations and communities interrelate, each with its own originality, sharing nevertheless a common future. This area of civilization opens onto the Americas; it is gradually surmounting the barriers of a paralyzing monolingualism and becoming conscious of its singular talent for symbiosis and for embracing, in all their overwhelming exuberance, the often contradictory elements which meet in the converging histories of the Caribbean basin. In today's threatened world this is a noble calling, at once fragile and ineradicable.

■ **Edouard Glissant**

Photo © Luc Joubert, *Le Point Cardinal* series, Paris

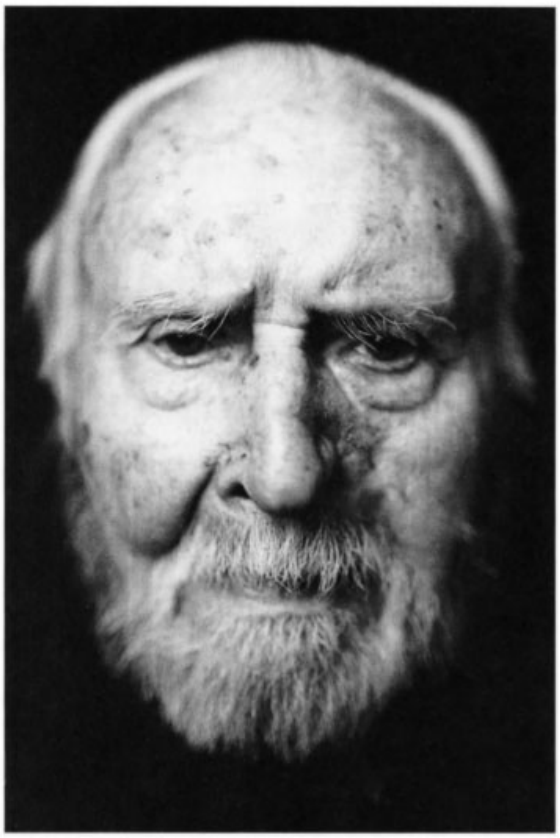
Figure 15. Agustín Cárdenas, *El Quarto Famba 1*, 1973. Published in *The Courier*, December 1981, 35.

A time-spun art

BY EDOUARD GLISSANT

MORHOR

a writer, artist and photographer of French origin, divides his time between the Antilles, France and Greece. In 1987, he held an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City entitled *Testigo mudo* ("Mute Witness"), which consisted of portraits of artists and intellectuals, for the most part Mexican. Two albums of his work will be published next year, one of large-format portraits and the other a collective work on the theme of "The new Gulliver's travels", on which Morhor has collaborated with a number of painters.



Morhor: The French painter André Masson (1896-1987)

Just as the waters of a river change as they flow to the sea, so Morhor's art ripens and matures, in dogged quest of its own definition. It is an art which might be likened to a journey of initiation, throughout which the voyager seeks to attain the node, the focal point wherein all human care is subsumed. At first Morhor used to place those he photographed against a stark background, a recessed doorway or an abandoned room, as though to warn them against those distractions of existence that tend to distance us from our own verities. Gradually he came closer to those who—one cannot call them models—are best described as his interlocutors, his conversation companions, even, perhaps, his confidants. It took him a long time to abbreviate this short, yet infinite, distance. It is as though, from then on, on the evidence of the face alone, divorced from its setting, he focused on that invisible breakline that announces the time, the need to depart, to grow old, and yet to endure.

The portrait thus evoked is not a death mask; rather it is the shade of a *doppelganger*. Not one of those whom Morhor thus encountered is reduced simply to an effigy that marked his route, an unyielding milestone. There is a response at the other end of this voyage. Morhor incites communication, the complicity of continuity. He hears the echo and questions and consults it. We can but admire and understand him as he constructs this precious, fragile "brushwood rampart", so redolent of the future. □

Figure 16. Morhor, *André Masson*, n.d. Published in *The Courier*, April 1988, 15.

Figure 17. José Campeche, *The Rescue of Don Ramón Power y* Giralt, ca. 1790. Oil on panel. Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico.

Figure 18. Miguel Luciano, *Platano Pride,* 2006. Chromogenic print, 40 x 30 in.

Figure 19. Luis Paret y Alcazar, *Self-Portrait*,

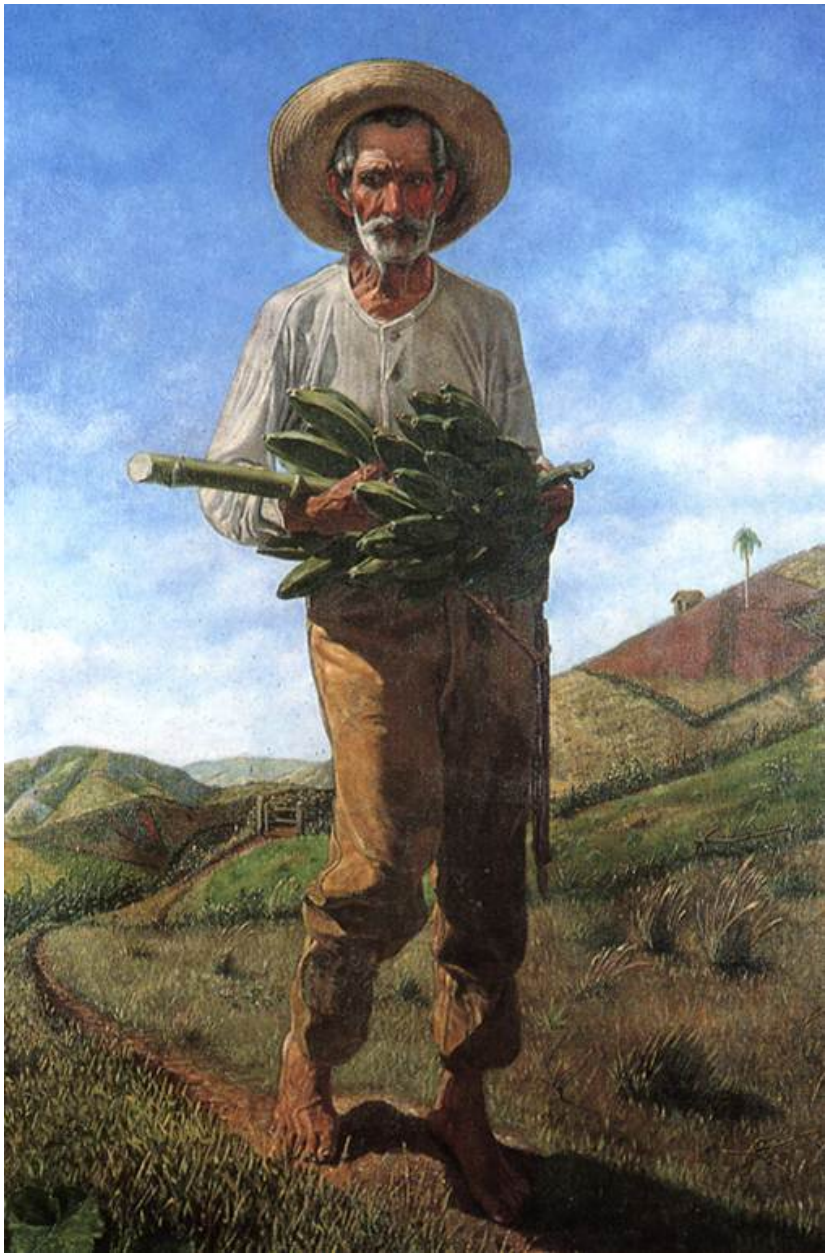


Figure 20. Ramón Frade, *El pan nuestro de cada día* (Our Daily Bread), 1905. Oil on canvas, 60 x 38.25 in. Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña.

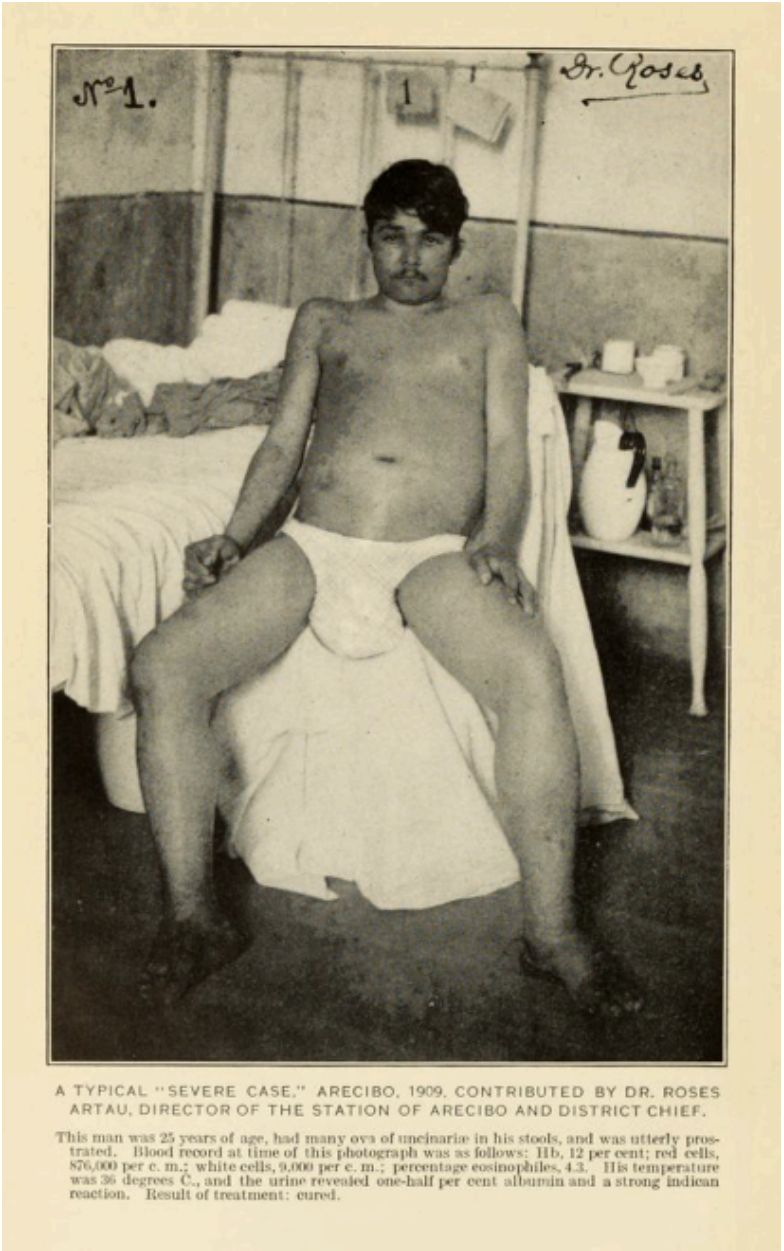


Figure 21. Cover of *Uncinariasis (Hookworm Disease) in Porto Rico: A Medical and Economic Problem*, 1911.

Figure 22. Joscelyn Gardner, *Créole Portraits II (A Collection of Singular & Scarce Creole Portrait Heads to Perpetuate the Memory of the Women of Egypt Estate in Jamaica)*, 2007. Wall installation with stone lithographs on frosted mylar and vinyl wall elements, 9 x 15 ft.

Figure 23. Joscelyn Gardner, Nago Jenny, detail from *Creole Portraits II*, 2007.

Figure 24. An interior view of a Jamaican house of correction, 1837.

Figure 25. Joscelyn Gardner, *White Skin, Black Kin: A Creole Conversation Piece*, 2003. Multimedia video/sound installation.

Figure 26. Jean Ulrick Désert, *Negerhosen2000*, 2000

Figure 2. Anne-Louis Girodet De Roucy-Trioson, *Portrait of J.B. Belley, Deputy of Saint-Domingue*, 1796. Oil on canvas, 62.6 x 44.5 in. Château de Versailles.

Figure 28. Anonymous, "Les Droits de l'homme. La Liberté des Côlon" (The rights of man. The liberty of the colonies), 1791. Colored engravings. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes.

Figure 29. Société Anonyme des Fabriques de Chocolate J. Klaus, 1902.

Figure 30. “Didier Drogba Kicks It in Ledehosen,” 2011. http://morethan-stats.com/didier-drogba-kicks-ledehosen/

Figure 31. Jean Ulrick Désert, *Negerhosen2000*, 2000.

Figure 32. Jean Ulrick Désert, *Negerhosen2000*, 2000

Figure 33. Christopher Cozier, “Child’s Shoes, Haiti,” from the blog *Visual Matters*, 2008. Photo taken by Karole Gizolme.

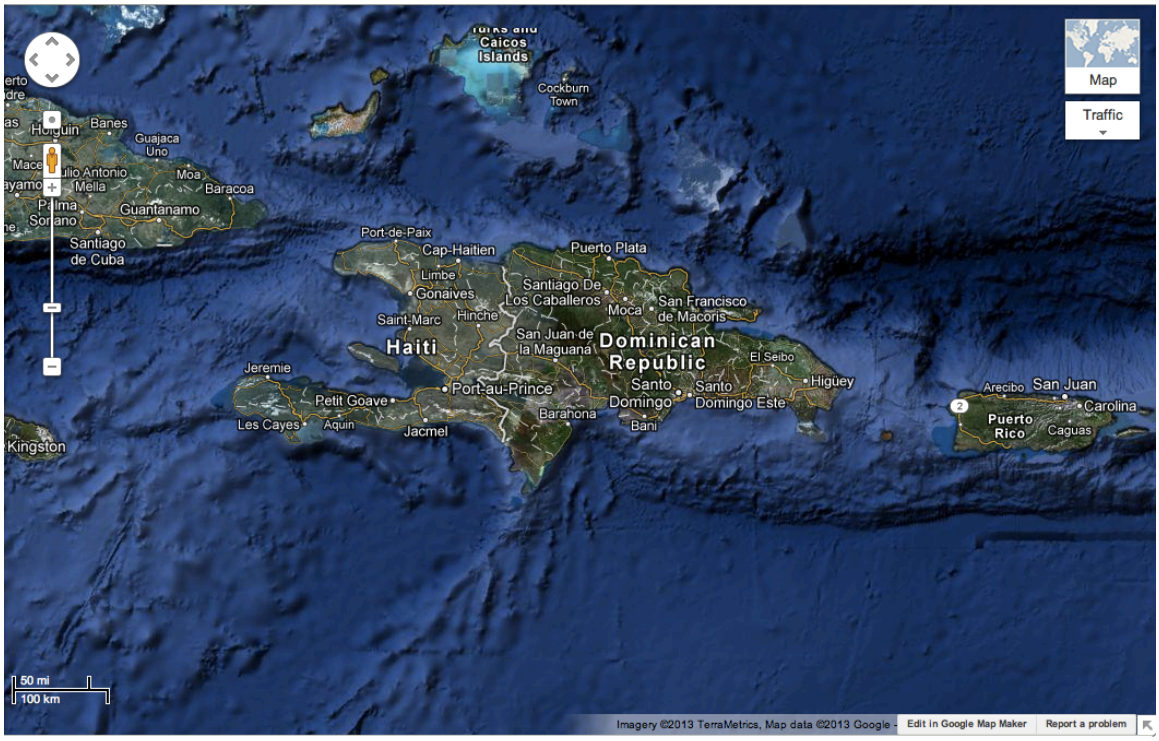


Figure 34. Satellite image of a section of the Caribbean, February 11, 2013.

Figure 35. Tony Capellán, *Mar Caribe* (Caribbean Sea), 1996. Plastic and rubber sandals with barbed wire, dimensions variable.

Figure 36. Annalee Davis, *Just Beyond My Imagination*, 2007. Installation, indoor/outdoor carpeting, cast plaster molds, sand, engraved red carpet, flag pole with embroidered flag, golf ball, 15 x 12 x 8 ft.

Figure 37. Hervé Beuze, selection of works from the series *Matrices*, 2007.

Figure 38. Hervé Beuze, *Machinique*, from the series *Matrices*, 2007. Sugarcane bagasse and metal, 197 x 79 x 6 in.

Figure 39. Tonel, *El Bloqueo* (The Blockade), 1989.

Figure 40. Sandra Ramos, *La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes* (The Damned Circumstance of Water Everywhere), 2003.
Etching and aquatint, 19 5/8 x 31 1/2 in.

Figure 41. Miguel Piña, *Untitled*, from the series *Aguas baldías* (Water Wastelands), 1992-1994. Vintage gelatin silver print, 10 ½ x 22 7/8 in.

Figure 42. Allora & Calzadilla, *Under Discussion*, 2005. Single channel video with sound, 6’ 14”.

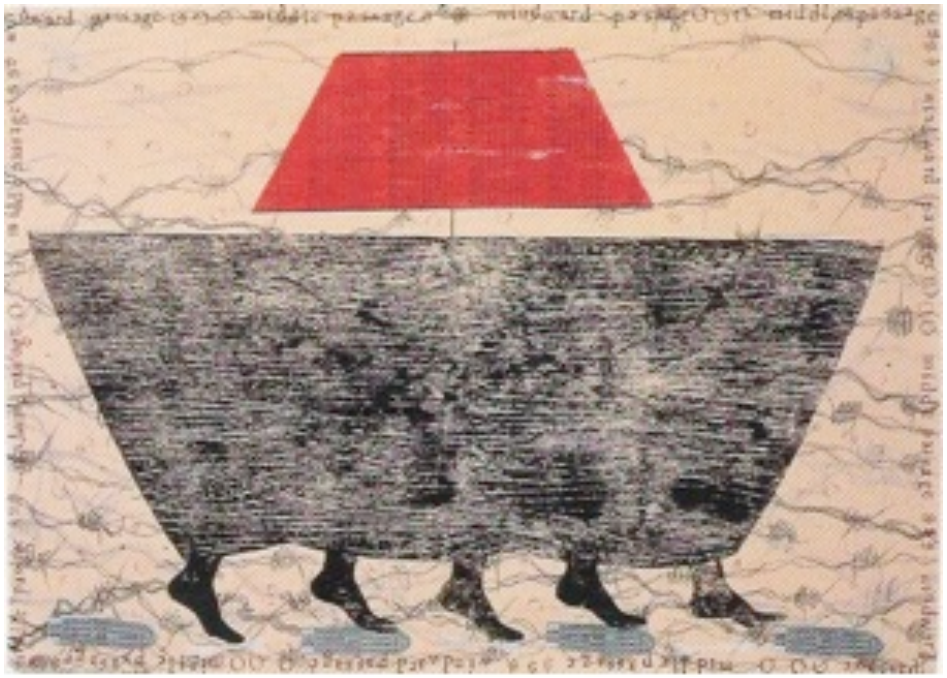


Figure 43. Rejin Leys, *The Ties that Bind IV*, 1994. Mixed media collage, 19 x 26 in.

Figure 44. Christopher Cozier, *The Castaway*, detail rom the series *Tropical Nights*, 2006-present.

Figure 45. Christopher Cozier, *Tropical Nights*, 2006-present. Mixed media on paper, each drawing 9 x 7 in.

Figure 46. Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream*, 1899.
Oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 49 1/8 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Figure 47. Winslow Homer, *Shark Fishing*, 1885.
Watercolor on paper, 13 5/8 x 20 in. Private Collection.

Figure 48. John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark*, 1778.
Oil on canvas, 71 11/16 x 90 7/16 in. National Gallery of Art.

Figure 49. Rigaud Benoit, *Mermaid (Sirène)*, 1962. Oil on Masonite, 24 x 19 in.

Figure 50. Regina José Galindo, *Isla*, 2006.

Figure 51. Regina José Galindo, *Tumba*, 2009. Video, 1’33”.

Figure 52. Regina José Galindo, *Tumba*, 2009. Video, 1’33”.

Figure 53. Regina José Galindo, *Tumba*, 2009. Video, 1’33”.

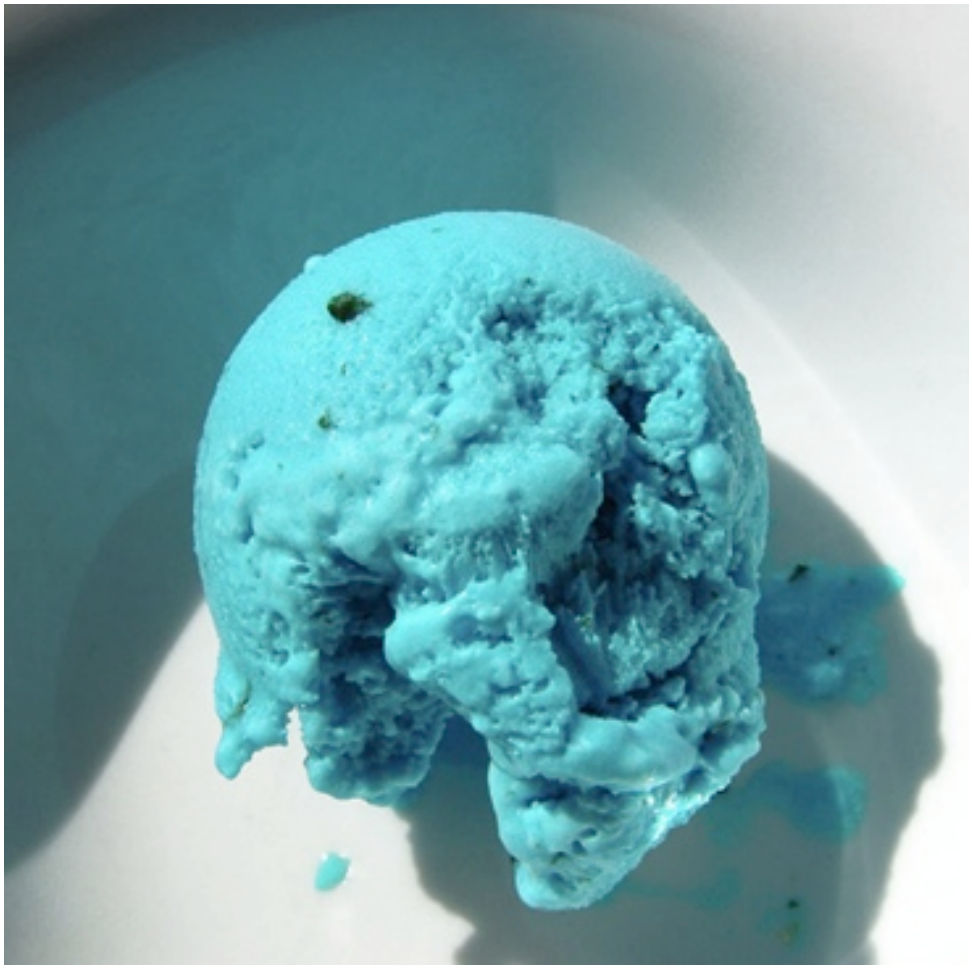


Figure 54. Quisqueya Henríquez, *Helado de agua del Mar Caribe*, 2002. Digital print, 39 x 39 in.

Figure 55. Quisqueya Henríquez, Detail of *Helado de agua del Mar Caribe*, 2002.

Figure 56. Quisqueya Henríquez, Detail of *Helado de agua del Mar Caribe*, 2002.

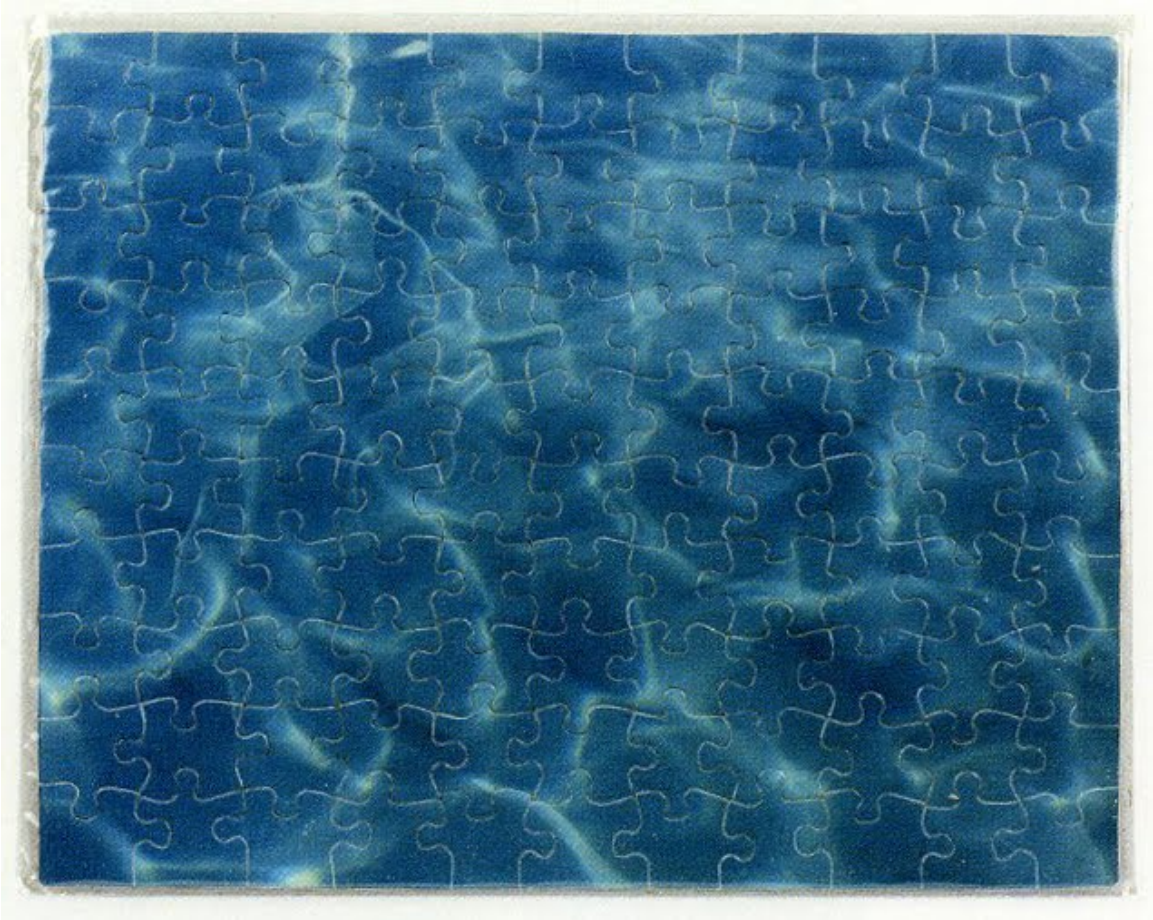


Figure 57. Felix González-Torres, *Untitled (Warm Waters)*, 1988.
C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag, 7.5 x 9.5 in.

Figure 58. Janine Antoni, *Touch*, 2002. Video installation, 9’37”.

Figure 59. Álvaro Barrios, *El mar Caribe*, 1971. Installation, dimensions variable.

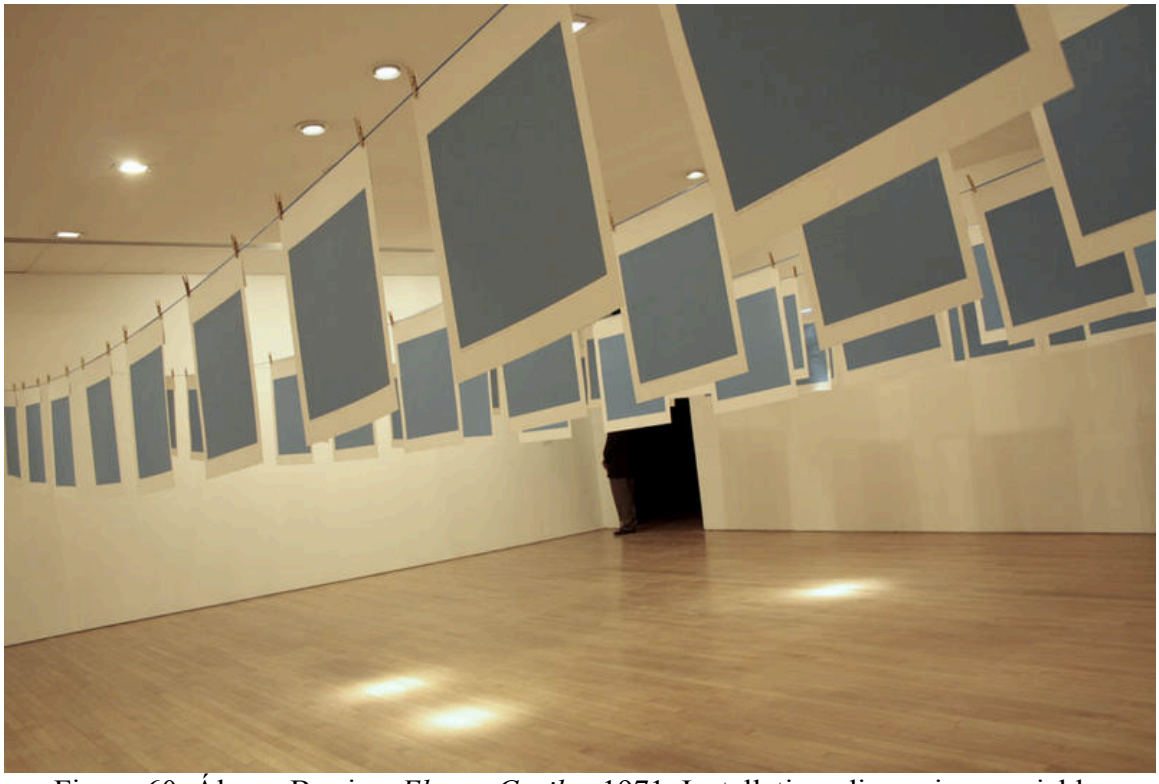


Figure 60. Álvaro Barrios, *El mar Caribe*, 1971. Installation, dimensions variable.

Figure 61. Álvaro Barrios, *El mar Caribe*, 1971. Installation, dimensions variable.

Figure 62. Álvaro Barrios, *El mar Caribe*, 1971. Installation, dimensions variable.

Figure 63. Tavares Strachan, *Who Deserves Aquamarine, Black, and Gold*, *(FLAG)*, 2005-06. Flag: cotton, linen. Lightbox, print. 27 x 33 inches.

Figure 64. Admiral Robert Peary's personal flag on the North Pole on April 6, 1909.

Figure 65. Detail of *Who Deserves Aquamarine, Black, and Gold, (FLAG)*.

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