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The Making of a Caribbean Avant-Garde

Postmodernism as Post-Nationalism



Therese Kaspersen Hadchity

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PREFACE

For the first ten years of the millennium I had a gallery in Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. Though located on a traffic artery between the city centre and the port, it was rarely very busy. Every month had its sprinkle of artists, collectors, students, professionals, expats, tourists and curious pedestrians, who would come in to peruse exhibitions, seek out works of interest or engage in longer discussions about the art scene at large, but the Zemicon Gallery never amounted to much of an art dealership. It did, however, host more than a hundred small exhibitions and, from 2000 to 2010, I found myself in the privileged intersection between the production and the reception of Caribbean art. The material, aesthetic and often personal concerns of the artists I worked with—their hopes, visions, disappointments, self-doubts and, thankfully, perseverance, made the field real in ways that my previous studies in art history and modern culture never could have. I came to share their frustrations with the political and scholarly indifference to their work, with the glaring contrast between its public scope and limited reach, and with the common perception of the field as Eurocentric and elitist, especially when measured against the modest living and working conditions many Caribbean artists endure for the love of their discipline.

Early in that decade, it became evident that the critical change of guard, which had long smoldered under the region's art world, was in full effect. Many artists sensed that the physical and conceptual center of the regional art scene had shifted, and that their own bid for a Caribbean contemporary had been displaced by new aesthetic codes and curatorial briefs: oeuvres that had previously been considered important or promising were suddenly regarded as anachronistic or even conservative. Naturally, this schism instilled a sense of confusion and weariness in one segment of the arts community and spawned new energy and confidence in another. While some artists were able to reinvent themselves and adapt to the methods and social dynamics of the new contemporary scene, others entered into a form of internal exile.

When I eventually closed the gallery, my longing to understand what I had witnessed (and participated in)—especially what seemed to me a peculiar and, at first, incomprehensible convergence between the moment's political and critical

re-orientations—drove me back to academia. This undertaking morphed into a PhD dissertation, which attempted to describe the formation of a post-nationalist hegemony around the visual arts in the Anglophone Caribbean, and which is the basis for this book. It has been a labor of moving targets, and it is with trepidation that I have applied myself—not to the investigation of what is easily identifiable as reactionary, but to the contradictions of what is now widely considered progressive.

Prior to this undertaking and along the way, I have benefited from brief or extensive exchanges with numerous people. Reaching back in time, I have written under the imagined scrutiny of Professor Peter Madsen, who inspired a generation of modernity scholars at Copenhagen University. I am, however, more immediately indebted to the lecturers in the Cultural Studies Programme at The University of the West Indies (Cave Hill), in particular the supervisors of my dissertation, Dr. Yanique Hume and Dr. Aaron Kamugisha for their wisdom, support and unfailing kindness; to its external examiners, Professor Neil Lazarus and Professor Timothy Brennan, for their inspiration and encouragement, and to the peer reviewers of my manuscript for their helpful suggestions. Yet the book is above all reflective of my interactions and discussions with artists and art-students from Barbados and the wider Caribbean, including Alicia Alleyne, Dean Arlen, Simone Asia, Arthur Atkinson, Ewan Atkinson, Walter Bailey, Eric Belgrave, Ernest Breleur, Mark Brown, Ras Ishi Butcher, Holly Bynoe, Charles Campbell, Alison Chapman-Andrews, Joshua Clarke, Vanita Comissiong, Christopher Cozier, Kenwyn Crichlow, William Cummins, Blue Curry, Annalee Davis, Dennis de Caires, Joscelyn Gardner, the late Bill Grace, Stanley Greaves, Versia Harris, Winston Kellman, Katherine Kennedy, Mark King, Denyse Menard-Greenidge, Jeriko, Nadia Huggins, Ian Moore, Petrona Morrison, Adam Patterson, Ras Akyem Ramsay, Sheena Rose, Corrie Scott, Heather-Dawn Scott, Aurelia Walcott, Russell Watson, Alberta Whittle, Nick Whittle, Kraig Yearwood and numerous others. I have likewise learnt much from critics, writers, curators and collectors, including Mervyn Awon, Natalie Batson, Dominique Brebion, Jane Bryce, Trevor Carmichael, Clyde Cave, Amanda Coulson, Khalil Goodman, Alistandra Cummins, Gabrielle Hezekiah, Rodney Ifill, Kate Keohane, Philip Nanton, Veerle Poupeye, Ark Ramsay, Adrian Richards, Rupert Roopnaraine, Nicole Smythe-Johnson, Lilian Sten, Allison Thompson, Estelle Thompson, Leon Wainwright, Harclyde Walcott, Anne Walmsley, Andrea Wells, Janice Whittle and Kathy Yearwood. My gratitude to Christopher, Anna, Nicolai, and to my mother and father, at whose dinner table my passion for debate began, can never be adequately expressed. The consideration, patience and unfailingly rapid email

responses I have received from the director, editors and staff at Purdue University Press has made the last leg of this long journey a remarkably enjoyable one.

As a part-time lecturer at the Barbados Community College and UWI (Cave Hill), I often wonder how my students will one day—as practicing artists, critics, policy makers and curators—see themselves in relation to art’s local and global trajectories. This book represents an attempt at identifying and questioning some of the processes that shape the creative space *they* will inhabit and is therefore dedicated to them.

Introduction



Background, Motivation and Challenges

In January 1993 the Barbadian artist Annalee Davis launched a newsletter titled *RA* (Representing Artists)¹ with the intention of creating a forum for commentary, debate and information sharing among the region's artists. Submissions and editorials included book- and exhibition reviews, short essays, advertisements, announcements and membership listings. Though the project was short-lived (the final issue was released in 1994), the newsletters offer an interesting record of an emerging regional discourse. Its contributors voiced their exasperation with the politeness and inconsequentiality of what, so far, had passed for local art criticism. More important, the conversations reflected fledgling divisions pertaining to the relationship between art and society, the desirable role of the state in cultural administration, and metropolitan influences versus a nascent Caribbean aesthetic. In a Barbadian visual arts context, these newsletters presented the first juxtaposition of a still fervent anti-colonial nationalism and an emerging postcolonial anti-nationalism. The debates echoed earlier ones in Jamaica and Trinidad, but at this point they heralded the ascent of what was to become an extremely influential avant-garde. The focal point of this book is that avant-garde and the circumstances under which it has consolidated itself and become normative.

Submissions from the Trinidadian artist and critic Christopher Cozier expressed frustration with what he perceived to be Trinidadian artists' tendency to appropriate foreign influences only when these are considered relevant to (ethnocentric and nationalistic) expressions of cultural identity. In the essay "Outside the Boundaries of 'Relevance'. Bowen's 'Wizards of the Forest'" he writes: "Painting which is considered 'Eurocentric' or 'Metropolitan' is deemed to be valid or to 'fit in' only if it serves this idea of culture. Realistic painters create postcards of national sites and types; others design logos of our various diasporic and/or

other icons of anti-imperialism. It's all a fairly neat package". He then makes the following (widely quoted) observation: "The crisis that our artists face resides in *the difference between representing culture and creating culture*; seeing culture as a static model or as a flexible and expanding phenomena"² (my emphasis).

What Cozier voices here is, of course, the perception that art should seek to question rather than preserve current hegemonies, that the artwork should instigate interrogation rather than being an end-product. To extricate art from the domain of cultural or national identity-claims, he advocates an open-ended aesthetic without a fixed message or agenda—an aesthetic, which takes the artist's individual experience rather than the collective vision as its point of departure. A citation of the artist Edward Bowen's declaration "I can't deal with grand themes" is followed by the observation that "Often the Grand Themes are already laid out for us to illustrate; as important as they may be, they can obstruct further search and discovery by our artists". In another contribution Cozier applauds works that eschew the "placatory and harmonious fusing of imagery and/or forms into a narrative form, which is quite common in the compositional approach of previous generations, such as Clarke, King and Harris"³: the artwork must, in short, *unsettle* rather than affirm established local narratives. In chapter 1, however, I wish to argue that some of the efforts debunked by Cozier were themselves designed to 'create culture'.

Whereas Cozier was intent on de-coupling art from a national (or indeed any preordained) agenda, Barbadian contributions by Annalee Davis, Allison Thompson and those co-signed by Ras Ishi Butcher and Ras Akyem Ramsay called for stronger national institutions. Thompson's argument for the importance of a national gallery and a written history of art⁴ was echoed by Butcher and Ramsay, who demanded substantive governmental investment in the arts and more discerning policies: "The recent attempts to promote Art and Craft as exportable products have not been undertaken with aesthetic criteria in mind, they have been treated as mass produced items, like sugar and rum."⁵ Davis, a little less confident in the prospect of establishing well-functioning institutions, suggested that "We are beginning to realize we must learn to function independent of these government or other institutions representing art and artists, until they operate in a fashion that is agreeable to artists",⁶ and Thompson second-guessed her demand for institutions by encouraging artists to also explore "alternative outlets and alternative spaces"⁷. Butcher and Ramsay, however, cautioned that also within artist-led organizations (such as the Barbados Arts Council and DePAM (De People's Art Movement)) social divisions and a lack of knowledge sharing had led to aesthetic stagnation and internal ruptures.⁸

Altogether, the RA-debates were reflective of a deepening chasm between those committed to an ongoing nation-building project and those turning their backs on it. While there was confidence in the critical potential of art, there were, in other words, differences about its fundamental aims and targets. The submissions by Thompson, Butcher, Ramsay and Davis thus remained anchored in the idea of cultural resistance, institution-building and a collective agenda, whereas Cozier saw the anti-colonial project as derailed and argued for “authentic forms based upon individual sensibility and our knowledge of art in the region and internationally”.⁹ Barbadian commentators were nevertheless in agreement with his call for a less conservative and more experimental and critical aesthetic, and similarly excited at the prospect of furthering regional interaction. Though unanimously unimpressed with the performance of national institutions so far, the Barbadians were persistent in their demand for increased state-support, but divided over the viability of private or alternative exhibition spaces. They also remained loyal to the idea, which Cozier rejects, of art as an expression of cultural identity, and there was an outright contrast between the postmodern and a-political connotations of Cozier’s call for the renunciation of ‘grand themes’, and the fervent humanism in Davis general reflections on Caribbean art:

The work I personally responded to at the Biennial, I shall describe as humanist in nature. It became evident how very different our lives are from our friends up north. Our concerns and realities make us feel insecure at times and our work reflects a painful and torrid past that we are still obviously attempting to come to terms with. In many ways, we are still human beings in the old-fashioned sense, trying to catch up with the ‘post-human’ era that is fast in taking over. Our work is most times passionate and often political. These are our personality traits. Many of the people in our region are concerned with life and death questions daily. We don’t have the time to question whether or not we exist; we feel the hunger in our bellies, we live through the harsh realities of international embargoes, we understand political oppression, corruption and opportunism, we suffer from the monkeying of the north and we understand what it means to be vulnerable and dependent.¹⁰

The ruptures reflected in the RA newsletters are a point of departure for this book, which describes the displacement of one artistic generation by another (henceforth referred to as the 1990s avant-garde or the Caribbean postmodern), and the development of a post- and sometimes explicitly *anti*-nationalist ‘common sense’ in visual arts practices, criticism and curatorship pertaining to the Anglophone Caribbean.¹¹

A fundamental premise for this project is the Bourdieusian notion that visual art, though materially produced in the artist's studio, is conceptually produced in the interface between museums, galleries, criticism, media, audiences and markets. To encircle the cumulative forces, which come to legitimize certain expressions and invalidate others, I have endeavored to scrutinize not only critical, but also institutional and exhibitionary developments. While section 1 of this book describes the intellectual lineage and aesthetic manifestations of the 1990s avant-garde, section 2 therefore describes the physical spaces and communities that have sustained it, and section 3 considers the changing profile of Caribbean contemporary art in an international context.

At a time when the world is witnessing an epidemic of regressive and venomous nationalisms, it may seem perilous to offer a critique of any anti- or post-nationalist momentum. The book is, however, motivated by the apprehension that, for all its rhetorical emphasis on 'difference' and 'criticality', the post-nationalist movement has often displayed the lack of self-scrutiny for which it once faulted its predecessors, and in many ways seems poised to inadvertently sustain, rather than challenge existing global hierarchies. In that regard, the book responds to Neil Lazarus' call for efforts to "alter somewhat the existing balance of forces in the field of postcolonial studies, by way of making the field as a whole more accountable to philosophies and political claims, interests, and demands, to which (to its detriment) it is currently little attuned".¹²

With a bit of conceit, my attempt to portray the post-nationalist hegemony from different angles can be described as a 'cubist' form of ideology-critique. The attempt to anchor discourse analysis in a material reality by fusing discursive, aesthetic, political, institutional and exhibitionary perspectives into one narrative is, I believe, a pioneering effort in an Anglophone Caribbean context, but one that itself is challenged by the scarcity of theory on the region's visual art.¹³ The book's argument rests on a combination of cultural theory, critical and curatorial essays, direct observation and scrutiny of contextualizing, but often relatively ephemeral material, and it must be acknowledged that some of the texts on which I have drawn (catalogue texts, pamphlets, blog entries) may not have been published with such close scrutiny in mind. While I have endeavored to be fair in my representation of the views I challenge, positions may, in other words, occasionally be inferred with a greater sense of direction, than was intended by their authors. On that note, I have favored printed sources over personal interviews, because they are traceable and independent of the way my interview questions might have been framed, and because it is such material that circulates and ultimately has (indeed *has had*) a wider and lasting impact.

A greater difficulty, however, presents itself when critical positions must be inferred on the basis of the visual record alone: if the question of interpretive liberty is forever fraught, this too is exacerbated by the rarity of dedicated literature on (or by) individual Caribbean artists.¹⁴ Currently, it has to be said, a large segment of the field also suffers from a theoretical awareness-deficit, which not only can be traced to the perennial gap between art and cultural theory, but also to the low priority of art education, critical *non-academic* writing and informed public debate in the Anglophone Caribbean. It is indeed troubling that many practicing artists (especially those without recent academic training) find themselves on the margins, or altogether outside, of the debates pertaining to their own discipline. While my argument about the received wisdom and general consensus of the moment—be it on nationalism, diaspora-aesthetics, cosmopolitanism or the popular—may be counter hegemonic and occasionally provocative, it is not least intended to stimulate *local* participation in the production of visual arts theory. All the same, I am aware that my argument, to borrow a phrase from Keya Ganguly, is presented in “the mode of keeping an appointment for which one knows one is already too late”.¹⁵ My impression that some on the ‘informed’ side of the said divide regard my inquiry as wholly unnecessary (or ill advised) is not one I have taken lightly, and it seems pertinent to make it explicit that, at a personal level, I have a great deal of admiration for many of the artists, critics and curators whose practices and positions are here put under scrutiny. Many have won the respect of scholars and institutions, brokered opportunities, inspired, encouraged and earned the gratitude of audiences and aspiring artists across the region. It is virtually impossible, at the onset of any artistic, critical or curatorial career, to know by what larger forces one’s contribution will be swept up, and, notwithstanding my extensive attention to specific artists and critics, it is self-evident that no one person (or entity) is singularly responsible for the watershed, and indeed the *convergence* of interests, described here—nor, however, do such transitions take place without interested agents acting as catalysts. I am, moreover, quite conscious that I too, through my own history of writing, managing art and crafting policy at a micro-level (and sometimes changing my mind about things), am vulnerable to some of the critiques here leveled, directly or implicitly, at other critics and spaces.

Originating in cultural studies and critical theory, the present study eschews the conventional parameters of art history, but also the moment’s general preoccupation with ‘visual culture’. It employs terms and categories, such as ‘autonomy’, ‘avant-garde’ and ‘alternative’, which some now see as obsolete, not only because I disagree that such classificatory terms necessarily are indicative of bad faith, but also because the discursive and aesthetic dynamics I describe, so clearly were avant-gardist in

their initial momentum, and because different notions of autonomy, as I hope to show, offer a productive lens for understanding the internal dynamics of the post-nationalist movement. Meanwhile, by straddling several areas of investigation, my argument is, of course, at risk of short-changing them all. Among the topics that could have been explored in greater depth are the various expressions of cultural nationalism that continue to co-exist with a cosmopolitan post-nationalism in the region's national arenas. Most lamentable, however, the book offers only fleeting discussions of the works and artists for whom, in a certain sense, it speaks: those who have been critical, but not dismissive of the nation-building project; those for whom art not only, to paraphrase Fanon, represents a 'passionate research', but also a deep and often opaque form of resistance; those who may not easily be drawn, or fitted, into the new social arrangements, which are now an integral component of the contemporary scene—and, not least, those emerging artists, who are about to discover that the relationship between opportunity and intellectual conformity (supposedly dismantled by the rhizomatic networks of a post-institutional, globalized art world) now merely presents itself in other guises.

Every discussion in the following chapters ultimately refers to questions about the possibilities of visual art and its direct or indirect engagement with its own traditions, society, discourse and politics, and about criticality and resistance in the different contexts of Western modernism, cultural nationalism and what I refer to as Caribbean postmodernism. At every turn, the discussion is, in other words, underpinned by contemplations of how artists in the Anglophone Caribbean have positioned themselves (or been positioned) vis-à-vis competing desires for cultural and critical autonomy, and how these dispositions have impacted on their visibility and success. In order not to overburden subsequent chapters with too much theory, the remainder of this chapter contains an outline of the conceptual baggage that underpins my argument, and an overview of the conversations that are already taking place in the literature pertaining to the field. Readers already familiar with (or less interested in) this admittedly rather dense terrain will find a brief overview of the book's chapters at the end of this introduction.

Problem or Necessity: Critical Autonomy in the Western Tradition

The centrality of the autonomy concept in theories of modern art can hardly be overstated. In *The Rules of Art* Pierre Bourdieu defines autonomy as the condition, which was imposed on art with the development of bourgeois secularism

towards the second half of the nineteenth century. Now liberated from its former dependence on church, court and aristocracy, art (like a redundant servant) had to invent a function and market for itself.¹⁶ It was, according to Bourdieu, in response to this challenge, that the market for symbolic goods, the inverse economy of deferred rewards, and the elitist cultivation of the 'pure gaze' developed in the form and context of modern art, which eventually *elected* the autonomy that was first imposed on it.¹⁷ Whereas Bourdieu is quite disparaging of what he (quite reductively) construes as the socially divisive impact of art under this dispensation,¹⁸ earlier Marxist theorists had put a premium on critical autonomy. For T. W. Adorno (and other members of the Frankfurt-school) art indeed represented a privileged critical vantage point—a pocket of freedom, through which emancipation from a compromised 'Enlightenment' might still be possible: "What [art] contributes to society is not communication with society, rather something very indirect, resistance."¹⁹ To Adorno, autonomy was therefore neither an imposed and inescapable condition, nor a virtue, but an all-important and *self-imposed* necessity threatened by capitalism's colonization of culture (the 'culture industry'): even though autonomy (and the rather closed and self-referential high modernism it produced) created a problematic distance between 'high' and 'low' art, it was a shield against the corrupting forces of capital and politics: the autonomy prescribed by Adorno was, in other words, never elitist by *intent*. Even Adorno, however, conceded that this elected autonomy could only ever be partial²⁰ and a later theorist, Peter Bürger, advanced the more nuanced idea, that the question of autonomy divided mainstream modernism from the historical avant-garde. Largely understood as the 'encapsulation', which at once secures the integrity of art and neutralizes its impact, autonomy was thus embraced by the former, and actively undermined by the latter. According to Bürger, the historical avant-garde (particularly a figure like Marcel Duchamp) thus made a point of drawing attention to the institutionalization of art in bourgeois society, though, as the record shows, ultimately to no avail, since the art-institution proved itself flexible enough to absorb and accommodate such rebellion: "All art that is more recent than the historical avant-garde movements must come to terms with this fact in bourgeois society. It can either resign itself to its autonomous status or 'organize happenings' to break through that status. But without surrendering its claim to truth, art cannot simply deny the autonomous status and pretend that it has a direct effect."²¹ Autonomy is therefore imposed on art in the sense that it only becomes visible to us if, and when, it is placed at a remove from our general life praxis. And yet it is clear that art not only, as Bourdieu suggests, operates within a symbolic economy, but that it is increasingly entangled in a *real* economy as well, and auton-

omy is therefore, paradoxically, contested both as ideal and as possible or actual reality.

Poststructuralism's attempt to dismantle the Hegelian dialectic and humanist epistemology to which modernism is intrinsically tied, and that privileges the subject as confidently self-present and able to effectuate meaning and signification, has further undermined the idea of autonomy—not only of the subject, but also as a privileged location within a dominant system from where a future 'outside' may be envisioned. As part of a more comprehensive Enlightenment critique, theorists like Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard have, moreover, challenged the conventional Marxist notion of a particular power structure, such as capitalism, as universally dominant. For Foucault, power relationships are thus neither fixed, nor monolithic, but strictly 'relational'. Power is, in fact, produced by "a multiplicity of points of resistance (. . . which) are present everywhere in the power network" and "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power".²² This notion of an inescapable circuit of power and resistance has arguably clouded the emancipatory thrust of supposedly liberatory struggles like Marxism and modernism with an air of futility (though this is a point contested by Habermas and others, who remain committed to the Enlightenment project). Meanwhile, if Foucault has had a particular effect on cultural practices, it has not only been a new emphasis on suppressed knowledges and marginalities, but also an adjustment of critical targets. Whereas the utopian horizon for Adorno amounted to a comprehensive social restructuring, the effect of Foucault on the idea of art as a form of criticism, has arguably been a narrowing of scope from that of total systemic change to hegemonic adjustments—a transition perhaps inadvertently reflected in the following statement by the American artist Martha Rosler: "[P]eople began saying 'there is no outside'. Which I felt was misunderstanding what an outside means. If we are talking about specific social institutions, of course there is something outside the institution. No one is saying there is something outside the society as a whole".²³

If poststructuralism from the late 1960s gave culture a less utopian inflection, it effectively vindicated the general fatigue with modernism's lofty and compromised ambitions and self-imposed asceticism (i.e., its necessary remove from mass-culture). At a point where modernism had reached a dead end, poststructuralism thus offered itself up as a legitimizing framework for the more inclusive, pragmatic and decidedly anti-Adornian aesthetic, which was labeled postmodernism and which arguably represents a departure from the former idea of art as an expression of negation or resistance. In describing postmodernism as the 'cultural

logic of late capitalism', Fredric Jameson notes that its eclectic and 'schizophrenic' character at once mimics, critiques and succumbs to the logic of post-Fordist capitalism.²⁴ When postmodern art furthermore repeats the historical avant-garde's attempt to overcome an inherent autonomy (for instance by presenting kitsch as art), it is often said to have surrendered the latter's revolutionary gist in favor of a generally affirmative (or resigned) position²⁵ that may be celebratory, ironic or, at most, momentarily subversive.

Meanwhile, partly due to the influence of feminism and postcolonial theory some have assessed the operative freedom and critical possibilities of art *within* the present (i.e., capitalist) system more optimistically, noting that the new philosophy of openness allows for attention to be drawn towards 'difference and marginality'. Thus reverting to the assumption (which Bürger denounced) that art may have a direct impact on society, such theorists may yet see postmodernism as a counter hegemonic agent.²⁶ On this understanding, however, art primarily attains an instrumental value as a supplementary discursive avenue, and with the removal of its particular insistence on autonomy (expressed through its unmistakable character of 'art'), nothing stands in the way of treating it as a 'resource' or, for that matter, as a 'cultural industry'. A notion of autonomy has, however, survived in the deconstructive concept of intertextuality derived from Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, according to which a work is more directly related to other texts than to the material world.

Postcolonial Strategies in a Postmodern Era

To what extent the trajectory of modernity, modernism and postmodernism in the West are relevant to the postcolonial world is a matter of longstanding debate.²⁷ The theory that informed Western postmodernism, did, however, also inform the field of postcolonial studies, which, from the 1980s, stole anti-colonialism's thunder and concentrated its theoretical efforts in the metropolitan academy. An influential segment of the field thus channeled poststructuralism's anti-essentialist and deconstructive energies towards the undoing of established categories and hegemonies, including conceptions of nationhood. While reiterating the nationalist preoccupation with cultural and psychological liberation, postcolonial scholarship in every discipline, including the visual arts, thus proffered a critique of the anti-colonial movement for its association with a teleological (and humanist) Western Enlightenment tradition. Central to that movement was, of course, an aspiration towards both political and cultural autonomy. The process of rehabilitating formerly colonized peoples from the scourge of European dominance through the development of independent cultural identities was not a defiant

gesture towards the world only, but also a matter of unifying nations divided by race, class and religion and by the scars of colonialism itself.²⁸ Indeed, the movement, which in the following chapters will be referred to as ‘Creole modernism’, was imbued with Fanonian aspirations towards internal unity, cultural confidence and a determination to resist all forms of imperialism. In a national context, this affirmative inscription automatically displaced the Western modernist tradition’s demand for critical autonomy. As will be discussed at some length in subsequent chapters, postcolonial critics have subsequently argued that anti-colonial nationalism’s cultural agents were co-opted into new hegemonies modeled on colonial antecedents, for instance by stimulating cultural elitism, by normalizing certain identities at the expense of others and by accepting the political and epistemological foundations of Western culture in general.

Far from a cohesive formation, postcolonial theory has, however, itself been divided over the legacies of anti-colonialism and indeed also over the political implications of poststructuralism. Edward Said thus acknowledges Foucault’s important work on the relationship between knowledge and power, but does not contest the materiality and human agency behind power itself.²⁹ As a means of correcting colonial narratives, histories and canons, Said advocates contrapuntal readings, which “must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it”.³⁰ Homi Bhabha, on the other hand, regards this method as a surrender to the default binarism of Western epistemology, and instead promotes the strategic potential of ‘mimicry’, which has the advantage of ambivalence and uncertainty. It is, he argues, “the sign of a double articulation, a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power”.³¹ Its (Derridean) induction of slippage and difference is thus intended to produce a state of hybridity (a non-binary ‘third position’), which is neither that of colonizer or colonized, but somewhere outside this relation. Bhabha’s strategy thus ultimately aims at dissolving, rather than leveling, the relationship between the two. Meanwhile, as Robert Young concedes, this rigorously anti-essentialist and anti-dialectic approach ironically undermines the notion of a coherent ‘colonial condition’ as an incitement for resistance in the first place.³² Geeta Kapur moreover observes that Bhabha’s politics of difference, which seeks to eschew the fangs of particular ideological persuasions, leads him to “favor[s] the short maneuver and the subtle negotiation” (while) “the longer navigational pull—to borders, frontiers, horizons [is] deferred to post-politics and pitched beyond the fin de siècle present”.³³ Such observations have led to the perception of Bhabha’s position as congruent with a politically vague and disillusioned (post-revolutionary) postmodernism, which effectively endorses the status quo. Timo-

thy Brennan's critique of Stuart Hall (and other pioneers of the 'culturalist' turn in criticism) indeed rests on their politically paralyzing rejection of earlier activists' deliberately essentialized racial and economic identities, to the effect that, in Hall's own words, "the strategy of gaining access to the means of representation has been reorganized and repositioned by the 'politics of representation itself'".³⁴

An explicitly postmodern imprint on Caribbean critical thought first surfaced in the writings of Antonio Benítez-Rojo.³⁵ Though Caribbean nations all emerged from the "big bang" of the plantation, he argues, the region is a place of "change, transit, return, fluxes of sidereal matter", its only constant metamorphosis itself. As the world's former peripheries increasingly migrate towards the metropolitan centers, the region moreover "flows outward past the limits of its own sea with a vengeance".³⁶ While this uncontainable profile paradoxically adds up to a certain Caribbean essence after all, the borders and expanse of the region are thus rendered more diffuse. Édouard Glissant likewise stresses the Caribbean's role as precursor and model for the chaotic, rhizomatic and creolizing nature of globalization's conflicting processes. Even though the relationship between centre and periphery may be a structural totality, it is always under re-negotiation, Glissant argues, and the anti-essentialist and anti-humanist 'relational poetics', which he has championed as a Caribbean (but not nativist) aesthetic, thus rests on a perception of global dynamics as being in a state of permanent movement and recalibration. The rejection of core-identities attached to ancestry or particular experiences of history (say, an Afro-Creole conception of 'Caribbeanness'), notably, does not preclude gestures of resistance, only the immutable targeting of a fixed geo-political or historical opponent. Specifically aimed at the Western humanist tradition, which reduces or consumes everything external to it as an exotic 'Other', Glissant moreover envisages a strategy of opacity,³⁷ which (unlike Bhabha's 'third position') maintains an oppositional, but *always changing*, conception of centre and periphery.³⁸

While Caribbean discourse has been deeply affected by postmodern thought over the last few decades, few intellectuals have domesticated such theory for the visual arts. Among the exceptions are Luis Camnitzer and Gerardo Mosquera, who have supported and documented the rise of a post-revolutionary Cuban art as well as contemporary art movements in Latin American and the Caribbean. With great subtlety and insight, both writers describe generational transitions, artists' concurrent (and often clashing) desires for local and international recognition and their complicated negotiations between social and aesthetic agendas. Though the history of Cuban and Latin American art is longer and more complex than that of the Anglophone Caribbean, many of the trajectories and debates

taken up in this book echo those described in Camnitzer's *New Art of Cuba* (1994) and Mosquera's many essays. Among the differences between the Hispanophone and Anglophone Caribbean, however, those relating to political histories, scale of economies, infrastructure and demographics are particularly significant for the discussion undertaken here. What now follows is an overview of literature and conversations about visual art in a predominantly Anglophone Caribbean context, and a more specific identification of my own theoretical points of reference.

Conversations about Diaspora, Nationalism, Cultural Policy and Caribbean Art

One of the most significant theoretical developments in recent decades has been the departure from a centre-periphery (i.e., 'dependency') conception of global dynamics. With the explicit objective of moving away from nation-based discussions of modernity and modernism, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) thus proposes a black diasporic counter narrative to the standard Western history of modernism. Though Gilroy in principle maintains the idea of cultural autonomy, it is an autonomy loosened from the material conditions and political inscriptions of particular national situations. His contribution has played a major part in the development of the diaspora-aesthetic, which is one of this book's focal points. Several theorists and art historians (including Stuart Hall, David Scott, Kobena Mercer and Richard Powell) have indeed welcomed the departure from territorially inflected (art) histories, yet, as will be discussed in chapter 3, the diaspora-concept has been brought to bear in very different and sometimes incongruous ways. In a specific visual arts context, Richard Powell's *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (1997) veers towards a diasporic essentialism by seeking to identify structural and thematic commonalities in black art across regions as different as the United States, Britain and the Caribbean. Yet, by effectively reverting to a series of national perspectives, the explicitly diaspora-based essay collection titled *Curating in the Caribbean* edited by David A. Bailey et al. (2012) inadvertently exposes the difficulty of applying a transnational perspective to a discipline as acutely tethered to local policies and infrastructures as the visual arts.

The post-nationalist turn in Caribbean criticism has not least been spearheaded by the influential journal *Small Axe*. Since its launch in 1997, it has been actively implicated in the process Brian Meeks³⁹ refers to as "hegemonic dissolution" in radical Caribbean thought—though its role, in retrospect, seems as much to have been that of begetting the new hegemony, which, in relation to the visual arts, is portrayed in the following chapters. While the discipline is relatively

marginal to its editorial scope, *Small Axe* has arguably become the region's most influential forum for visual arts commentary, and my broader argument often engages with the writings of its past or present editors, in particular David Scott, Annie Paul and Christopher Cozier.

In the current intellectual and economic climate, the region's incremental production of national art histories, monographs, period- and genre-studies has not gathered much momentum. Landmarks in this genre do, however, include Petrine Archer-Straw and Kim Robinson's *Jamaican Art. An Overview with a Focus on Fifty Artists* (1990), David Boxer and Veerle Poupeye's *Modern Jamaican Art* (1998), Poupeye's *Caribbean Art* (1998), Alissandra Cummins, Allison Thompson and Nick Whittle's *Art in Barbados: What Kind of Mirror Image* (1999), Ann Walmsley and Stanley Greaves' *Art in the Caribbean* (2010), Claudia Hucke's *Picturing the Postcolonial Nation: (Inter) Nationalism in the Art of Jamaica 1962–1975* (2013), Natalie Urquhart's *The Art of the Cayman Islands—A Journey Through the National Gallery Collection* (2016) as well as the illustrated survey-books from Robert and Christopher Publishers in Port-of-Spain: *Pictures from Paradise. A Survey of Contemporary Caribbean Photography* (2012) edited by Melanie Archer, Mariel Brown and O'Neil Lawrence, *See Me Here: A Survey of Contemporary Self-Portraits from the Caribbean* (2014) by Marsha Pearce and *A-Z of Caribbean Art* (2020) edited by Melanie Archer and Mariel Brown.

More critical attention has been directed towards studies in visual culture. Works like Krista Thompson's *An Eye for the Tropics* (2006) and Patricia Mohammed's *Imaging the Caribbean* (2010) show how pictures (ranging from photographs and paintings to postcards and advertisements) contribute to the construction of 'tropicality' and a picturesque 'Caribbeanness'. *An Eye for the Tropics* in particular regenerated a sense of purpose in a number of artistic and curatorial practices (as reflected in the 2011 exhibition *Wrestling with the Image* discussed in chapter 8). With a more current scope, Thompson's *Shine* (2015) focuses on the use of light to transcend conditions of 'un-visibility' in African diasporic visual culture. *Empires of Vision* (2014) edited by Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy, contains multiple essays similarly centered on art, visual culture and 'scopic regimes'. Though I share some contributors' hesitation to equate the power of vision and gaze with Empire's more material methods of coercion, the expanding field of visual culture has, as the editors point out, enabled an integration between areas of knowledge previously foreign to one another. While the focus of this book remains on the visual arts, its combined perspectives and occasionally polemic tone likewise places it at some remove from conventional art history.

Former boundaries have likewise been breached in cultural policy, where an

outright embrace of the ‘cultural industries’ is displacing previous efforts (however partial or tentative) towards the protection of culture’s critical autonomy. Cultural development in the postcolonial world has, of course, never been far removed from the pursuit of political and economic empowerment, and Caribbean governments’ preferential policy investment in more popular art forms and handicrafts at the expense of experimental art, has arguably been an underlying factor in the critical and artistic dissociation from nation and state, which is one of this book’s recurring themes. In this area, I have drawn extensively on Suzanne Burke’s pioneering study on Caribbean cultural policy *Policing the Transnational: Cultural Policy Development in the Anglophone Caribbean (1962–2008)* (2010). While Burke describes the instrumentality, which (with shifting objectives) has underpinned the region’s post-Independence cultural policy, my discussions mainly turn on the alignment between an export oriented cultural policy and the cosmopolitanism and transnational networks, which now set the pace for the region’s contemporary art scene.

The overarching argument of this book thus takes its cue from those who have had reservations towards the critical purchase of a diaspora aesthetic, and those troubled by poststructuralism’s political corollaries. Among the former, Leon Wainwright’s *Timed Out. Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (2011), thus diagnoses the ‘politics of time’ by which hierarchic relationships are reproduced both within the diaspora and between diasporic and mainstream art in the metropole. Wainwright’s insights on generational dynamics in Caribbean art and the false promises of globalization and multiculturalism, as expressed in an expanding body of critical writing, have been invaluable resources for the development of my argument. My purpose, however, is not only to reiterate (as much as I agree with it) Simon During’s contention that, coupled with a postmodern “rejection of resistance along with any form of binarism, hierarchy or telos”, postcolonialism has effectively become a “conciliatory rather than a critical, anti-colonialist category”.⁴⁰ What I attempt to demonstrate is the amalgamation of interests, which have ushered in, consolidated and reinforced a post-nationalist momentum in the critical framing of contemporary Caribbean art. The argument therefore borrows most of its conceptual armature from a humanist Marxism and from writers who have striven to set the record straight regarding now vilified anti-colonial movements. It leans on Benita Parry’s “Liberation Movements: Memories of the Future” (1998), on the essays assembled by Neil Lazarus in *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (1999) and his own *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011). The latter also returned me to the work of Fredric Jameson and the controversial ideas he originally posited in “Third-World Literature in the Era

of Multinational Capitalism”.⁴¹ Inspired by Lazarus’ properly ‘Jamesonian’ and historicizing analysis of that controversy (and his pertinent observation that the national allegory is not necessarily *nationalist*⁴²), I pick up on Jameson’s perception of the cultural expression as the (often oblique or unconscious) reflection of a given national situation. My argument is no less indebted to Timothy Brennan for his sharp and rigorous polemic—in books like *At Home in the World. Cosmopolitanism Now* (1997), *Wars of Position* (2006) and *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies* (2014)—against the ruses of cosmopolitanism, the left’s migration to the right, and the marginalization of Marxism, anti-colonial nationalism and humanism itself in contemporary criticism.

While this book attempts to describe the impact and different manifestations of the post-nationalist turn in Anglophone Caribbean arts communities, time has not stood still during its production. The initial belligerence of the 1990s avant-garde has gradually given way to a degree of acquiescence, and some of its energies have been passed on to a new ‘next generation’. My impression that the latter has lost the collective sense of mission and urgency that (for all their differences) was so characteristic of the last two generations has been a contributing motivation for the writing of this book.

Increasingly, however, scholars are pushing for a post-poststructuralist resetting of the field at large. In lieu of such exhausted concepts as hybridity and creolization, which “are a part of the ruins of colonial processes of definition, naming and mapping”, Erica James (2009) advocates the “pleasure of disorientation”⁴³ in an apparent move towards a less overdetermined approach. Similarly frustrated by the deadlock of a black British and diasporic art so fatigued by representational and counter-representational wrangles, that the art itself has become invisible, Leon Wainwright’s latest book, *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art* (2017) argues for a ‘strategic phenomenology’. Meanwhile, along altogether different lines, the curatorial essays by Tatiana Flores and Michelle Stephens for the exhibition *Relational Undercurrents* (briefly discussed in chapter 8) signals a partial return to a material and geographical conception of the Caribbean—yet, with its conceptual basis in Glissant and Deleuze, effectively seems to double down on the post-Marxist and post-nationalist direction of current Caribbean criticism.

In more forthrightly advocating a pan-Caribbean revival, *The Making of a Caribbean Avant-Garde* undertakes a mapping-project of its own by connecting the region’s visual arts discourses with aesthetic and institutional developments. It examines different manifestations of a post-nationalist postmodernism, changes in the political and institutional environment and an exhibitionary trajectory that

suggests an increasing conformity in the selection and presentation of Caribbean art when it goes abroad. All the way, the discussion returns to the question of how artists, institutions and policy-makers situate themselves between competing demands and convictions and the need to survive and succeed. The argument is presented in three thematic sections, each containing an introductory chapter, a long middle chapter (presenting case-studies or extended analysis) and a 'spin-off' chapter at the end. The first section is titled Discourse, and chapter 1 (Shaping Up the Past: The Critique of Cultural Nationalism) suggests that, since the 1990s, visual arts discourse in the Anglophone Caribbean has been dominated by voices claiming to represent 'the next generation'. It is argued that the image of this group as open-minded, progressive, anti-elitist and post-nationalist depends on a reverse portrayal of the Creole modernist movement as the opposite, and that current discourse condemns cultural nationalism to a conveniently fixed location in history. In chapter 2 (The Next Generation), I suggest that the post-nationalist momentum has produced a Caribbean postmodernism, which includes a spectrum of aesthetic orientations spanning from the 'conceptualist' to the 'performative or participatory' and 'the culturalist'. Chapter 3 (Diasporic Connections) outlines the conceptual, practical and political dilemmas a diaspora-aesthetic presents for the visual arts. On the whole, section 1 argues, that the post-nationalist turn dismantles the externally resistive thrust of its anti-colonial modernist predecessor, and 'performs' a political involvement, which it simultaneously disables. The second section is titled Spaces and addresses institutional developments. Chapter 4 (The Origin of Alternative Spaces, the Troubled Museum and Cultural Policy in the Caribbean) discusses museological concerns since the 1960s, broadly outlines the Caribbean's post-Independence cultural policy trajectory and identifies some of the problems that follow from an instrumental approach to culture. Chapter 5 (Three Spaces in Context) describes the proliferation of alternative spaces across the Anglophone Caribbean and their rapid transition from margins to mainstream. It portrays three specific venues in Trinidad, Barbados and the Bahamas, observes differences in their national contexts, and seeks to identify what they have in common. Chapter 6 (Stronger Together: The Creative Network) discusses the creative network that links such spaces in relation to questions about the public sphere in a neoliberal policy climate. Altogether, section 2 argues that, in the absence of strong cultural institutions, the region's alternative spaces effectively become institutions themselves, and thereby inadvertently 'cover for' the culturally indifferent neoliberal state. It also raises concerns over the increasing institutionalization of the avant-garde and its implications for a meaningful critical dynamic. The third and last section, Encounters, looks at the

metropolitan prospects of Caribbean art and the apparent 'returns' of the post-nationalist momentum. Chapter 7 (*Through the Eye of the Needle*) discusses the concept of 'the contemporary' and the respective climates of receptivity, which have emerged with multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and diaspora aesthetics in the north. Chapter 8 (*The Caribbean Contemporary in the United States*) relates the trajectory of Caribbean exhibitions in the United States since 1995 to the concurrent development of a Caribbean postmodernism, as well as to the emergence and growing influence of the region's alternative spaces. Building on previous arguments, chapter 9 (*Three Barbadian Artists and Their 'National Situation'*) demonstrates how the critical potency of particular works and oeuvres may change, when the national frame is suspended and works are re-situated in another political context. The core argument presented in section 3 is that the Caribbean postmodern, which generally sees itself as an agent of a globalization from below, may also serve the consolidation of global hierarchies.