

# Contemporary Art of the Hispanophone Caribbean Islands in an Archipelagic Framework

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The trope of the Caribbean as a locus of heterogeneity and fragmentation has almost become a truism. Many characterizations of the region begin by evoking its variegated colonial history resulting in a staggering “ethnic and cultural diversity,” to paraphrase Stuart Hall.<sup>1</sup> In a well-known passage, Antonio Benítez-Rojo refers to the Caribbean as “a discontinuous conjunction (of what?): unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools, clumps of bubbles, frayed seaweed, sunken galleons, crashing breakers, flying fish, seagull squawks, downpours, nighttime phosphorescences, eddies and pools, uncertain voyages of signification; in short, a field of observation quite in tune with the objectives of Chaos.”<sup>2</sup> Despite these obstacles, locating a distinct Caribbean poetics is very much his goal and continues to be an urgent project for literary scholars, writers, and theorists.<sup>3</sup> When Benítez-Rojo, Édouard Glissant, Kamau

- 1 See Stuart Hall, “Myths of Caribbean Identity,” in O. Nigel Bolland, ed., *The Birth of Caribbean Civilization: A Century of Ideas about Culture and Identity, Nation and Society* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004), 580.
- 2 Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd ed., trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.
- 3 Think here, most prominently, of Édouard Glissant’s overarching project in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989) and *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); or Kamau Brathwaite’s in *Roots* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). Similar moves have been made in relation to the literature of the Hispanic Caribbean by Benítez-Rojo and Silvio Torres-Saillant in *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and *Caribbean Poetics: Toward an Aesthetic of West Indian Literature* (Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree, 2013), in which a “West Indian” aesthetics expands from the anglophone Caribbean context to include writers, for example, from the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Brathwaite, and others have sought to locate a distinctive Caribbean aesthetic, however, they often came up against linguistic barriers. Their motives are elucidated by Kelly Baker Josephs: “Caribbeanness is not some insubstantial, inexplicable connection between the people living in the region; rather, it is specifically based in a shared experience. The sharing may not be conscious, but the idea is to make it conscious, to protect it by stating/naming it.”<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing that Caribbean diversity is undeniable, we nonetheless argue that the visual arts are uniquely equipped to bridge the region’s language and cultural divides. By employing the archipelago as an analytical framework for understanding contemporary art of the insular Caribbean, we locate correlations in the visual aesthetics across the different linguistic regions whose creators are often unaware of their synchronicities. While recent exhibitions of Caribbean art have largely embraced the narrative of heterogeneity itself as an organizing principle, such diversity often underscores the linguistic divisions, imperial histories, and contemporary conditions that separate the different areas in the Caribbean from each other.<sup>5</sup> Through our approach, hispanophone, francophone, anglophone, Dutch, or Danish origins and the particular traits of each linguistic region become less relevant, for the goal is to identify the continuities and junctures between experiences of the islands and their diasporic communities.<sup>6</sup> An archipelagic vision of the Caribbean, therefore, holds in tension, and in relation, the points of fracture and fragmentation as well as connectivity and shared histories that organize the region. This view is ruled less by the visual logic of difference—one thing is not like the other and is therefore unique—and more by a logic of analogy, whereby the very strategies, themes, and mediums engaged by contemporary Caribbean visual artists encourage a recognition of unexpected mirrorings and inevitable unities across Caribbean spaces and bodies.

The Caribbean itself is notoriously hard to categorize. No one knows where the sea begins or ends, but islands are a defining component of the region, both historically and in the popular imagination. Other geographic markers are subject to debate. Is the Gulf of Mexico Caribbean? Northeast Brazil? Bermuda? Venezuela? Central America? How do we delineate the hispanophone Caribbean? The sea itself has been known by many names, including North Sea, Sea of the Antilles, Sea of Venezuela, West Indian Sea, Great Western Ocean, Gulf of New

4 Kelly Baker Josephs, “Versions of X/Self: Kamau Brathwaite’s Caribbean Discourse,” *Anthurium* 1, no. 1 (2003): 3.

5 Large group shows, such as “Caribe Insular: Exclusión, fragmentación y paraíso” (Madrid, Casa de América, 1998), “Kréyol Factory” (Paris, Parc de La Villette, 2009), “Who More Sci-Fi than Us?” (Amersfoort, The Netherlands, Kunsthall KadE, 2012), and “Caribbean: Crossroads of the World” (New York, El Museo del Barrio, 2012), tend to emphasize the variety and heteroglossia borne of the region’s complex history. See the exhibition catalogues: Antonio Zaya, ed., *Caribe Insular: Exclusión, fragmentación y paraíso* (Madrid: Casa de América, 1998); Yolande Bacot, Claude Archambaut, and Christian Coq, eds., *Kréyol Factory: Des artistes interrogent les identités créoles* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009); Nancy Hoffman, ed., *Who More Sci-Fi than Us?* (Amsterdam: KIT, 2012); and Deborah Cullen and Elvis Fuentes, eds., *Caribbean: Art at the Crossroads of the World* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, in conjunction with Yale University Press, 2012). For an in-depth analysis of exhibitions of contemporary Caribbean art in the 1990s, see Carlos Garrido Castellano, “Periferia de la periferia: Sobre el papel de las exposiciones colectivas en la definición del arte caribeño contemporáneo,” *Arte, individuo y sociedad* 25, no. 1 (2013): 65–75.

6 Contemporary initiatives such as the print and online platform ARC, the trilingual website Uprising Art, the Tilting Axis network, and such residency programs as Caribbean Linked in Aruba, Alice Yard in Trinidad, and Fresh Milk in Barbados align with our project. See [www.arcthemagazine.com](http://www.arcthemagazine.com), [www.uprising-art.com](http://www.uprising-art.com), [www.tiltingaxis.org](http://www.tiltingaxis.org), [caribbeanlinked.com](http://caribbeanlinked.com), [aliceyard.blogspot.com](http://aliceyard.blogspot.com), and [freshmilkbarbados.com](http://freshmilkbarbados.com) (accessed 28 July 2016).

Spain, and Gulf of Mexico. Antonio Gaztambide-Géigel points out that the very terminology of the Caribbean “is a 20th century invention.” Describing the region as a locus of imperialist and neocolonialist expansion, he observes, “This invention comes about, precisely, as the result of our region’s transition from European to United States hegemony.”<sup>7</sup> Noting that the Antilles was the most common denomination for the region prior to the last century, he identifies three categories for charting the Caribbean: “1) the *insular* or *ethno-historic* Caribbean [which includes Suriname, the Guyanas, and Belize], 2) the *geopolitical* Caribbean, and 3) the *Greater Caribbean* or *Caribbean Basin*.”<sup>8</sup> The first refers to territories that “share the experience of the slave-driven sugar plantation;” the second “places the emphasis on the regions where most of the US military interventions took place,” including Central America and Panama, and the third incorporates Venezuela and “at least some portions of Colombia and Mexico.”<sup>9</sup> He remarks that “many speak about the Caribbean without defining it,” and urges, “We should demand of others as well as of ourselves a definition of which Caribbean we speak of.”<sup>10</sup> Yarima Bonilla and Max Hantel offer a definition of the Caribbean in terms of sovereignty, mapping only those countries that have experienced challenges in gaining or maintaining autonomous status or that continue to exist as nonsovereign states.<sup>11</sup> International organizations group the region differently: while CARICOM does not contain any hispanophone countries, the Association of Caribbean States is comprised of twenty-five member states, including Venezuela, Colombia, and Central America, though not Puerto Rico.

We wish to suggest that the question of defining the Caribbean, and where the Hispanic Caribbean might sit in relation to a broader regional cluster or entity, is at the heart a question of “mapping,” of creating different kinds of “cognitive maps” to (re)imagine and (re) think the relation of various Caribbean spaces, and peoples, to each other and to a greater world.<sup>12</sup> Maps afford different conceptual frameworks for organizing how we think about the Caribbean; we believe a map(ping) that emphasizes the region’s insularity, in its archipelagic dimensions, captures a visual logic of analogy and continuity that provides one framework for placing Hispanic insularity in dialogue with that of the rest of the Caribbean. Our mapping, then, or vision, of the hispanophone Caribbean focuses less on territories than on the relations between territories—insular, coastal, diasporic, and so on. Those relations are what

7 Antonio Gaztambide-Géigel, “The Invention of the Caribbean in the Twentieth Century (The Definitions of the Caribbean as a Historical and Methodological Problem),” *Social and Economic Studies* 53, no. 3 (2004): 128.

8 *Ibid.*, 138 (italics in original).

9 *Ibid.*, 138, 141, 143.

10 *Ibid.*, 150.

11 See Yarima Bonilla and Max Hantel, “Visualizing Sovereignty: Cartographic Queries for the Digital Age,” *sx archipelagoes* 1 (2016), [smallaxe.net/sxarchipelagos/issue01/bonilla-visualizing.html#fn:23](http://smallaxe.net/sxarchipelagos/issue01/bonilla-visualizing.html#fn:23).

12 The term “cognitive map” was first introduced by Edward Tolman in his 1948 essay “Cognitive Maps in Rats and Men,” *Psychological Review* 55, no. 4 (1948): 189–208. Defined as “a type of mental representation which serves an individual to acquire, code, store, recall, and decode information about the relative locations and attributes of phenomena in their everyday or metaphorical spatial environment” ([www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive\\_map](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_map); accessed 9 July 2016), it was used in relation to literary and aesthetic theory by Marxist theoretician Fredric Jameson who argued for applying “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping” to spatial analyses of literature and culture. For Jameson, cognitive maps facilitate a reader’s or viewer’s ability to map in their minds their position within a greater, more complex totality. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 52–53.

also frame our understanding of the relevance of the hispanophone Caribbean, both as an idea and as an area of study.

In another kind of mapping, for example, the hispanophone islands—Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic—are also commonly understood to belong to the area known as Latin America. An archipelagic approach impels us to revisit the distinction Caribbean-Latin America but not with the objective of Balkanizing the region further by separating the hispanophone Caribbean as its own area of study. Instead the goal should be to simultaneously delineate and deconstruct the boundaries that define multiple kinds of relationships between Latin America and the Caribbean—hispanophone or otherwise—and identify new directions for fruitful comparative scholarship that transcend geographical constraints. What we are suggesting is precisely that we use this exploration of the relevance of the idea of the hispanophone Caribbean as an occasion to articulate and make explicit the contingent nature of the various maps and mappings of the region that we deploy, based on disciplinary or intellectual location. For example, the social sciences (particularly political science and economics) commonly include not only Haiti but often the British and Dutch Caribbean in considerations of Latin America, while in the humanities the separation Latin America/nonhispanophone Caribbean persists and conceptually has remained more or less unchallenged. It is therefore common in the humanities to regard Latin America and the Caribbean as discrete regions despite their geographical proximity and, in the case of Hispaniola, shared land borders.

The very concept of Latin America came into being when many of the former Spanish colonies obtained their independence early in the nineteenth century. As the second nation after the United States in the western hemisphere to gain independence, and given that it provided aid to South American revolutionary movements, Haiti should have been a regional leader. Instead it was shut out of the first hemispheric congress of independent nations, held in Panama in 1826. In *The Idea of Latin America*, Walter Mignolo underscores the problematic relationship of Haiti to the rest of Latin America. Noting that Haiti was colonized first by Spain and later by France, he remarks, “Haiti was ‘Latin’ from day one, since both Spanish and French are Latin languages.” Nevertheless, “Haiti did not fit the pattern of ‘Latin’ America because ‘Latin(s)’ were supposed to be of European descent . . . and not of African descent.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, sociologist Anthony Maingot writes of how whites in the Caribbean “construct[ed] their own terrified consciousness of blacks”; Haiti, according to Gert Oostindie, “inspired nothing but racially based distrust” among Europeans, Americans, and Latin Americans in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Before the British Caribbean islands started becoming independent in the early 1960s, Haiti was classified as a part of Latin America, but more recently the country has been grouped into a reading of the Caribbean as African diaspora. Indeed, in the

<sup>13</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 112.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Maingot, “Haiti and the Terrified Consciousness of the Caribbean,” in Gert Oostindie, ed., *Ethnicity in the Caribbean: Essays in Honor of Harry Hoetink* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 53; Gert Oostindie, “Introduction: Ethnicity, as Ever?,” in *Ethnicity in the Caribbean*, 15.

historiographic essay “African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History,” Ben Vinson notes that consideration of ethnicity in Latin America had for a long time been relegated to the study of indigenous populations and *mestizaje* (racial mixings traditionally understood to be between Indians and Europeans), so that “it has long been possible to do Latin American history without referencing blackness or the African Diaspora.”<sup>15</sup>

Though the islands were the first point of contact in the time of exploration and “discovery,” it is of crucial import that “America” emerged when the territory encountered in the western hemisphere was known to be a continent. For the European powers, it was the existence of a fourth continent that was so remarkable—the islands on their own were considered a more ancillary discovery, insular accompaniments to a massive territory, a “New World.” As the region began to be mapped, the smaller islands were divided into groups, a tendency that continues to this day, so that those known to us as the Lesser Antilles or Windward Islands were originally designated by Columbus as the “Cannibal Islands,” and the islands around Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire (today the Leeward Antilles or ABC Islands) were referred to by the Spanish conquistadores as the “Useless Islands,” for their lack of lucrative natural resources. These geographic designations favored the larger islands or Greater Antilles (comprised of Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Hispaniola). When it was not outright forgotten, the Caribbean archipelago—tellingly named the Archipelago of Mexico on a series of maps—was subsumed into a continental narrative.

“Latin America” presupposes a continental identity. Alfredo Jaar’s signature piece *Logo for America* (1987/2014), a light animation displayed in public space in New York, features the words “This Is Not America” superimposed over a map of the United States before concluding with a map of the hemisphere’s continental landmasses with the word “America.” Puerto Rican artist Karlo Andrei Ibarra, in a piece tellingly titled *Continental* (2007), ironically reminds his viewers that Puerto Rico is both part of the American continent and of the United States by displaying the sentence “Vivo en América” in neon lights. Indeed the hispanophone islands strongly identify with the notion of “Latin America,” so much so that it was the Cuban intellectual José Martí who wrote one of the most fundamental documents articulating an Americanist identity, the treatise “Our America” (1892).<sup>16</sup> Popular music from the Hispanic Caribbean today is full of invocations to continental Latin America, in such songs as Calle 13’s “Latinoamérica” (2010) and Gente de Zona’s “La gozadera” (2015). In the latter, the performers ask Latinos of the hemisphere to join them, and they include the diaspora by calling out to Miami. Although the refrain of the song states, “Del Caribe somos tú y yo” (“You and I are from the Caribbean”), the rest of the lyrics list the countries of Latin America, including Brazil, but fail to name nonhispanophone Caribbean countries.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, it is unlikely that

15 Ben Vinson, “African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History,” *Americas* 63, no. 1 (2006): 3.

16 José Martí, “Our America,” in P. Brenner et al., eds., *The Cuba Reader* (New York: Grove, 1989), 24–29.

17 Gente de Zona, “La gozadera,” by Alexander Delgado Hernández, Randy Malcolm, and Arbise González, on *Visualizate*, Sony Music, 2015.

many, or any, Haitians, Trinidadians, Jamaicans, Vincentians, Bahamians, and so on consider themselves Latin Americans or Latinos.

Our efforts to think through, in contrast, an archipelagic framework for contemporary hispanophone Caribbean visual production began in response to the Getty Foundation's initiative Pacific Standard Time: Latin America/Los Angeles (PST: LA/LA), a sponsored series of exhibitions set to take place throughout Southern California museums in 2017. While the initiative seeks to propel new research around the topic of Latin American art, it also carries built-in assumptions about the nature and geography of "Latin America," with most of the exhibitions featuring artists and movements from the continental Americas.<sup>18</sup> Pondering an exhibition of contemporary Caribbean art through the lens of Latin America, we began with the countries traditionally grouped under this rubric—Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico—and embarked on an intellectual exercise to remove them from a continental Latin Americanist narrative and insert them into a story that is only about islands. An exclusively insular narrative makes sense partly because of the distinction between island and continent but also because it brings to the fore issues arising from the colonial legacy—such as sovereignty, migration, sustainability, and, of course, race and ethnicity—that are relevant to the region as a whole but that simply cannot be overlooked when dealing with the Caribbean.

The discourse on Latin American art has largely focused on the interrelated topics of modernity, formal innovation, relation to mainstream movements, and an anxiety about originality. Art scenes in major capitals eclipse those of smaller cities or other areas, and though attempts at forming South-South networks have recurred, for the most part countries look toward Europe and the United States rather than toward each other. A center-periphery paradigm—with the seats of colonial and neocolonial power understood as the "center" and the Latin American countries as "peripheries"—has dominated discourse, revealing a constant preoccupation to measure the region's artistic production against hegemonic standards.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Caribbean (island) often becomes precisely what a modern "Latin America" strives to define itself against—hence Venezuelan artist Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck's bold declaration, "If the grid is the new palm tree of Latin American art we are making progress."<sup>20</sup> Revealing a decidedly Eurocentric perspective, the quotation celebrates the move away from seemingly backward insular tropes, such as the palm tree. In so doing, however, it avoids the ways Caribbean realities challenge received understandings of modernity as a movement toward "progress," resulting in formal purity and homogeneity. In the words of Sibylle Fischer,

18 Information about the initiative and exhibitions can be found at [www.pacificstandardtime.org](http://www.pacificstandardtime.org). Along with the exhibition "Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago" and its catalogue, currently in preparation by the authors for the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA), the other exhibition to include nonhispanophone countries of the Caribbean is "Circles and Circuits: Chinese Caribbean Art" for the Chinese American Museum and the California African American Museum.

19 See, for example, Nelly Richard, "Postmodern Disalignments and Realignments of the Center/Periphery," *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (1992): 57–59.

20 Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck, quoted in Kaira M. Cabañas, "If the Grid Is the New Palm Tree of Latin American Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 367.

“If we read modernity from the perspective of the Caribbean colonies, the opposite view seems more plausible: that heterogeneity is a congenital condition of modernity, and that the alleged purity of European modernity is an a-posteriori theorization or perhaps even part of a strategy that aims to establish European primacy.”<sup>21</sup>

Two presumptions shape, then, the relationship of the Hispanic Caribbean to Latin America. First, as the awkward place of Haiti attests, it is the Caribbean aspect of Latin America that has often allowed for a more explicit discussion of the colonial politics and discourses of race as they shape the region’s past, present, and future. In this sense, blackness and an “Afro-Caribbean” thought space provides one set of possible “ties” or connecting links between the Hispanic Caribbean and the rest of the French, English, Dutch, and Danish Caribbean. Second, the focus on the Hispanic Caribbean as an archipelago, that is, a networked insular space, problematizes a continental bias inherent in the hemispheric model and an oceanic bias evident in the notion of diaspora. As Martin W. Lewis has described, both the continent and the ocean as totalizing geographic forms overdetermine our view of both terrestrial and maritime space.<sup>22</sup> The planet is divided into cultural areas organized by continents and their surrounding ocean basins, and each hemispheric map becomes a subset of this global totality with its island chains subsumed under, within, and alongside defining continental landmasses. To the degree that diasporic models tend to focus on circulation on the oceans and movement toward the continent and away from the island, they also lead, unconsciously, away from the insular as a geomaterial form.

An archipelagic understanding of space and spatial relations has been emerging and crystalizing more recently in the work of such scholars as Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Peter Hay, Philip Hayward, Elaine Stratford, Godfrey Baldacchino, Jonathan Pugh, Brian Russell Roberts, and Michelle Stephens.<sup>23</sup> It was prefigured in Caribbean studies by Peter Hulme.<sup>24</sup> These theorists each have their own points of emphasis, but what we wish to stress in a Caribbean visual context is the simultaneously partial, particular, and all-encompassing scope of an archipelagic visual aesthetic. An archipelagic cognitive map does not seek to totalize regional identity in quite the same way as hemispheric frameworks with their continental biases. Rather, it assumes the hegemony of the continental frame and looks instead to identify—as we flag in the notion of “undecurrents”—hidden, latent, emergent, or residual connections, those

21 Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 22.

22 Martin W. Lewis, “Dividing the Ocean Sea,” *Geographical Review* 89, no. 2 (1999): 188–214.

23 See Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007); Peter Hay, “A Phenomenology of Islands,” *Island Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2006): 19–42; Philip Hayward, “Aquapelagos and Aquapelagic Assemblages,” *Shima* 6, no. 1 (2012): 1–11; Elaine Stratford et al., “Envisioning the Archipelago,” *Island Studies Journal* 6, no. 2 (2011): 113–30; Jonathan Pugh, “Island Movements: Thinking with the Archipelago,” *Island Studies Journal* 8, no. 1 (2013): 9–24; Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Stephens, “Archipelagic American Studies,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013): 1–20; and Michelle Stephens, “What Is an Island? Caribbean Studies and the Contemporary Visual Artist,” *Small Axe*, no. 41 (July 2013): 8–26.

24 See Peter Hulme, “Subversive Archipelagos: Colonial Discourse and the Break-Up of Continental Theory,” *Colonial Discourse* 14, nos. 36–38 (1989): 1–23. Hulme proclaims at the end of his essay, which traces the European colonizers’ continental epistemologies, “Let the continental fissure into the archipelagic” (18).

less-dominant links across the region that interweave between other more dominant narratives and maps. Our contribution to this issue, and to this conversation about the place of the hispanophone Caribbean in relation to various other units in the region—the other Caribbeans, Latin America—is to point to the less visible archipelagic connections between the Hispanic Caribbean islands and other insular nodes, with their ties and flows to even more diasporic clusters and hubs, in the region and even further out into the world. In this formulation, diaspora locations become not privileged metropolitan mainland cities but their own types of linked nodes in an insular network.

An archipelagic model underscores a different set of concerns, around race, history, the legacy of colonialism, and the inclusion of diasporic experiences, upsetting the accepted geographic and conceptual boundaries of Latin America. Our cognitive map of the Caribbean as archipelago takes the island and the insular condition as the crucial starting point. The archipelagic shapes our view of the Caribbean as less a bounded or fragmented cultural area and more a geomaterial and geohistorical assemblage of sea spaces and islands. We delineate an idea of Caribbean space shaped by experiences of “disjuncture, connection and entanglement *between and among* islands,” and an insular imaginary focused on interchanges that occur between island, mainland and sea in a “world of islands [that] might be experienced in terms of networks, assemblages, filaments, connective tissue, mobilities and multiplicities.”<sup>25</sup> Irad Malkin’s description of the ancient Greek archipelago as a layering of “superimposed maps [that] will reveal a dense, if somewhat messy, palimpsest of lines that connect “nodes” via “ties” and express different . . . flows [that] appear mostly across open maritime spaces and, perhaps most important, they move along *multidirectional* network lines,” is for us also an apt description of a networked Caribbean archipelago in which islands serve as the primary nodes for organizing insular relations from island to island, from island to sea, and from island to mainland.<sup>26</sup>

In Nayda Collazo-Llorens’ *Geo Dis/connect* (2014), multiple “found maps” make up a wall installation of 360 framed images, an assemblage or cluster of maps in all shapes and forms that emphasize the artist-subject’s creative hand, and force viewers to create their own kind of cognitive map as they situate themselves in relation to the piece (see fig. 1). In contrast to imperial maps, whose exclusive purpose was charting possessions, archipelagic assemblages such as this involve a process of counter mapping, whereby imagining the provenance of a particular work, idea, or subject means reframing a different paradigm, plotting new points of connection, imagining, and imaging new coordinates. Joseph’s description of a Caribbean poetics as a conscious project of naming is relevant here, for as with Collazo-Llorens’s piece, this type of conceptual map represents an intentional effort to name, to map, to visualize what a fragmented sense of place, a sense of geographic disconnect that yet also has a certain

25 Stratford et al., “Envisioning the Archipelago,” 114 (italics in original).

26 Irad Malkin, *A Small Greek World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18.



Figure 1. Nayda Collazo-Llorens, *Geo Dis/connect*, 2014. Three hundred-sixty framed images, 4 x 6 in. each; overall dimensions approx. 5 x 16 ft. Installation view at LMAK Projects, New York. Courtesy of the artist

kind of order, might look like when represented using the visual language and tools of a more traditional cartographic imagination.

Conceptual forms of mapping constitute one shared set of themes in the visual arts across the islands and their diasporas. Acts of (re)mapping also serve as a way for subjects who feel marginalized as a result of their race, gender, geography, or colonial condition to assert their presence. Such is the case in Ibarra's *Continental*, discussed above; in Tavares Strachan's series *You Belong Here* (2012–14), also comprised of texts written in neon lights; and in Firelei Báez's *Memory Like Fire Is Radiant and Immutable* (2014), in which nineteenth-century maps are disrupted by drawings of female body parts and decorative elements that impart a distinctly feminist perspective (see the visual essay in this issue). Alternative cartographies plot regional and insular constellations that encompass both fractures and links. Engel Leonardo's

*Antillas* (2013) consists of an archipelago of plants from the region, each displayed in a white pot, simultaneously referencing modernist aesthetics and African motifs (see fig. 2). The stands in which the pots are placed, multicolored and different in their detail, reflect the specific lines of influence that might shape any given island in an archipelago. And yet, while no stand or plant is alike, together they form a collection of analogous objects, visually connected but not “natural” in their joining. Rather, they are an intentional, curated collection—“natural” plants artificially connected to each other by the artist and, subsequently, the viewers, who upon seeing them now also hold Leonardo’s cognitive map in their minds. The plants “act” together much in the same way as assemblages, that is, they are both made up of entities that cluster together precisely because they choose to act “in concert.”<sup>27</sup>

Our approach, an archipelagic cognitive map, identifies “subterranean contiguities and undercurrents that extend to the conceptual,” pushing back against the understanding of the islands as discontinuous, isolated, hermetic, and beyond comprehension and challenging the conceptual boundaries imposed on spaces that are geographically contiguous and share



Figure 2. Engel Leonardo, *Antillas*, 2013. Concrete, steel, acrylic, enamel, and endemic and native plants; 15 × 92 × 25 cm. each. Courtesy of KADIST (Paris and San Francisco)

27 Stratford et. al., “Envisioning the Archipelago,” 122.

similar ecologies and historical processes.<sup>28</sup> The archipelago therefore functions for us here, conceptually, both as metaphor and as a material geographic form. The iconic arc of islands that visually represents the Caribbean is itself an archipelago, defined as both a chain of islands and their interwoven seas.<sup>29</sup> The arc of islands, however, also represents a shared ecosystem, with entangled seas, climates, borders—linked landscape ecologies that constitute a second set of shared themes across the archipelagic Caribbean. As a geohistorical space, the contemporary Caribbean could also be described as made up of mangrove-like, entangled histories constituted out of the multiple “trajectories” and “itineraries” that inform how we have mapped, and continue to map and navigate, the Caribbean world. These intertwined strands of history are not solely captured or foregrounded in an official colonial history. Rather, the visual theme of entanglement—ecological, geohistorical—captures an intentional conceptual effort to offer a vision of the contemporary Caribbean that “tangles” multiple geographical trajectories and historical chronologies. For Glissant, this notion of entanglement represents more than a different kind of narrative of the Caribbean past. It is itself a mode of temporality that structures and infuses the Caribbean present with multiple historical traces. These traces then influence future trajectories; interacting with each other they lead to a palimpsest of movements, relations, and transformations that cannot be simply mapped onto or within core-periphery frameworks.

In regard to depictions of the landscape ecologies of the Caribbean, contemporary artists revise old and worn “paradise island” tropes, reconsidering the Caribbean as a region of shared ecosystems and entangled habitats. In Lilian Garcia-Roig’s paintings, landscapes are almost impenetrable, offering rhizomatic as opposed to arboreal depictions of tropical nature not as ordered pastoral landscapes but as dense webs and thick weaves of interrelation (see fig. 3). As a Cuban-American artist painting in plein air in Florida, Garcia-Roig unwittingly shares a sensibility with other Caribbean and diasporic painters, including Ángel Otero, Hurvin Anderson, Sofía Maldonado, Hector Arce-Espasas, and Edouard Duval-Carrié, whose works fundamentally challenge and upset the tourist view of the Caribbean landscape as endless beaches that the industry promotes as a blank slate. Another shared concern is the vulnerability to natural disasters, evident in work such as Frances Gallardo’s *Cynthia (Hurricane Series)* (2011), in which wind currents become lacey arcs and filaments rather than dulcet breezes (see fig. 4). Humberto Díaz reimagines laconic sandy beaches and docile waves as roiling, massively tiered and folded, tsunami-esque, wind- and water-riven shores (*Tsumani*, 2009), while Maksaens Denis seeks to come to terms with the earthquake that devastated Haiti through a complex new media installation (*36 secondes*, 2010). Caribbean environments are also depicted—by Allora + Calzadilla, Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Christopher Cozier, and Nicole

28 Paul Lyons and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan, “Introduction: Pacific Currents,” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2015): 553.

29 For more on archipelagoes—their definitions and various forms—see Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Stephens’s introduction to their forthcoming collection, *Archipelagic American Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).



Figure 3. Lilian Garcia-Roig, *Cumulative Nature: Palmage Diptych*, 2014. Oil on canvas; 30 x 54 in. Courtesy of the artist

Awai, among others—as being exploited in tangled webs of state interests and capitalist or militarist motives.

Metaphorically, the archipelago also represents a more networked rather than core-periphery approach to the Caribbean.<sup>30</sup> The older framework of metropolitan modernity—metropole/capital city/colonial periphery—is replaced by the framework of an overlapping, intersecting, and bisecting “coloniality,” in Mignolo’s terms, where islands lead out to multiple racial diasporas which lead back to islands.<sup>31</sup> If a hegemonic understanding of “Latin America” has worked to render race as marginal to modernity and marginalize the islands as racialized spaces, Caribbean insularity re-introduces the idea that there is no escape from an ever-present, subterranean coloniality that “maps” the Americas as a palimpsestic space

30 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 29. As Glissant states further: “The time came, then, in which Relation was no longer a prophecy made by a series of trajectories, itineraries that followed or thwarted one another. By itself and in itself Relation exploded like a network inscribed within the sufficient totality of the world” (29).

31 Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).



Figure 4. Frances Gallardo,  
*Cynthia (Hurricane Series)*, 2011.  
Paper cut out; 19.5 × 25.5 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

of racial modernity. In such a space, there are no centers and peripheries, no homelands and lands of settlement, but rather places that lie in-between, as points of rest (or nodes) in a constantly shifting and moving, historical and social landscape framed by the structuring forces of coloniality.

As one of these in-between locations (“on,” as in, seen while “on” the liminal space of the island), the horizon—a frequent trope of one’s exile or entrapment in desert island discourse—figures as another shared theme with more depth and richness in contemporary art of the Caribbean archipelago. In the performance *Vanishing Point* (2013), Carlos Martiel underscores the ways the horizon functions as a kind of guillotine, a metaphor for how black bodies were severed from their ancestral homelands (see fig. 5). In his evocation of nude anatomical drawings, Martiel also gestures to the different notions of the human that lie embedded in and were imposed upon or mapped onto the black body and skin, not unlike the lines that intersect with and are pinned onto his body during the performance. As itself a kind of “vanishing point” for erased or vague notions of a black subjectivity that lie on the edge of the human, black skin functioned in the space of the island-colony as a kind of edge or threshold or milieu of encounter.

Opposite page:  
Figure 5. Carlos Martiel, *Vanishing Point*, 2013.  
Nitch Museum, Naples, Italy.  
Photograph by Amedeo Benestante.  
Courtesy of the artist



Thinking about the shoreline, Peter Hay describes the edge as an important feature of insular imaginaries, shaping island sensibilities around fixed boundaries, enclosing borders and isolated identities but also interconnectivity, threshold spaces such as the beach, the coastline, the skin, reminding spectators of the nature of insularity and functioning both as a limit and as a threshold of possibilities. Indeed, in Cuban art the horizon often also signals the sense of entrapment wrought from living in a communist regime, but it is a common referent for other Caribbean islanders as well. Tony Cruz continually returns to the horizon in his drawings and installations (see fig. 6). Counter to the evocation of the sublime of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by Sea* (1808–10), the horizon is for Cruz more like a cruel joke, the ultimate illusion because it does not really exist. In his words, “The horizon is not, but comes to be a tangible object when it is represented. In the meantime, no, it is an illusion.”<sup>32</sup> For other artists—among them Teresita Fernández and Janine Antoni—the horizon suggests a platform or field of potential in its bridging of earth and sky. According to Derek Walcott, “You can travel the horizon in any direction, you can go from left to right or from right to left.

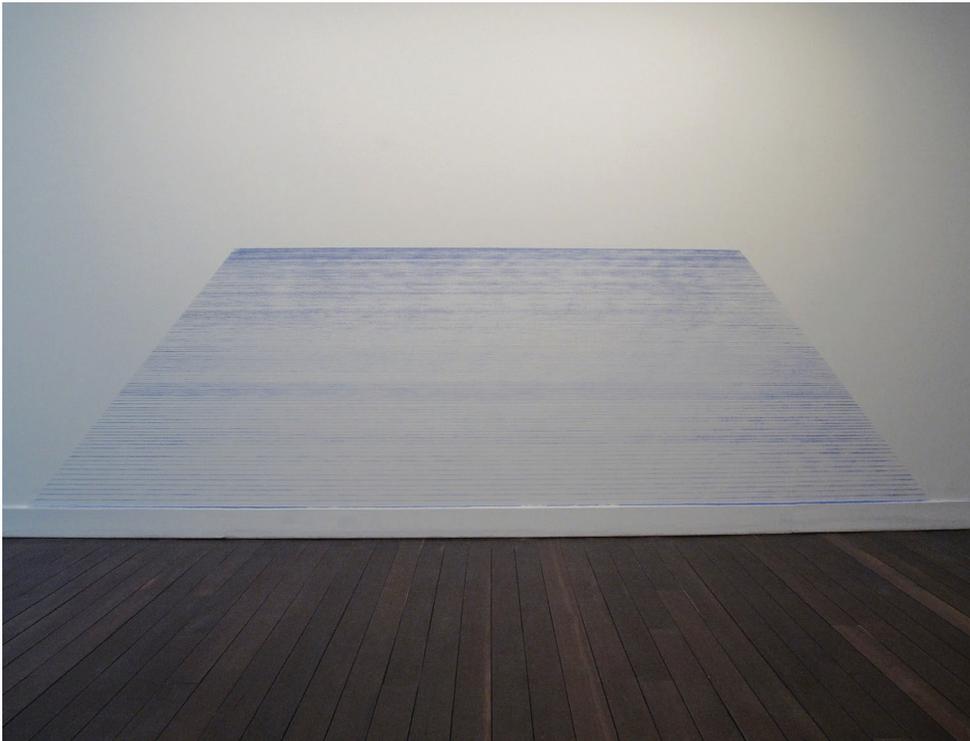


Figure 6. Tony Cruz, *Horizonte Dibujo*, 2011. Chalk on wall; 5 × 12 ft. Galería Casas Riegner, Bogota, Colombia. Courtesy of the artist

32 “Porque el horizonte no es, pero pasa a ser objeto tangible cuando es representado. Mientras tanto, no, es una ilusión”; Tony Cruz, in conversation with Tatiana Flores, 12 February 2016 (translation ours).



Figure 7. Humberto Díaz, still image from *Déjà Vu*, 2008. Video; 20 min., 20 sec. Courtesy of the artist

It doesn't proceed from A to B to C to D and so on. [Hence the horizon] is not a rational line. It's a circle."<sup>33</sup> Humberto Díaz captured this idea beautifully in *Déjà Vu* (2008), a video that pans horizontally across Havana's Malecón but in which the viewer surprisingly encounters the same jogger moving through space (see fig. 7). The horizontal perspective reflects a view of the horizon that focuses our attention both on the borders that divide and mark off land as well as on the movements that circulate across the currents of sea and air. The horizon can be blurred, a confusing, liminal space between land, sea, and air, a feature of the paintings of Jorge Luis Bradshaw. In these and many other works, the image of the horizon captures both the yearnings and the uncertainties that exist in the liminal, relational spaces between islanders, looking outward across the seas. Such looks point to moments of self-similarity between insular spaces and island bodies and an archipelagic world that reveals itself through a horizontal logic of connection, similarity, and analogy.

Carlos Martiel's representation of the Afro-Caribbean body as itself the "vanishing point" or edge between intersecting vectors of self and world also points toward a use and representation of the body in the service of explicit political goals. As another set of shared themes, in various kinds of representational acts and in varying mediums, Caribbean visual artists take up representation as an active process rather than a passive translation of the visible world. "Political representation," according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

33 William Baer, ed., *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 158–59.



Figure 8. Miguel Luciano, *Sela and Adi, Amani Kites, SmART Power, Kenya*, 2012.  
 Photo documentation from the public art project *Amani Kites*, Nairobi, Kenya. Courtesy of the artist

“occurs when political actors speak, advocate, symbolize, and act on the behalf of others.”<sup>34</sup> As opposed to the mimetic function associated with representation in traditional art history, artists from the Caribbean tend to regard representation in a political sense. All the Caribbean islands, even those that obtained independence early in the nineteenth century, have seen their sovereignty challenged through colonialism or occupations, and in some cases (most visibly, Puerto Rico in Hispanic America) continue to exist as nonsovereign states. Political agency has been an elusive notion and in many cases an unattainable ideal. For this reason, representation takes on added urgency in an insular Caribbean context.

Art works engaged in representational acts actively reconfigure the world they inhabit, whether through social practice—in the case of Miguel Luciano or Tania Bruguera—or by encouraging an interactive relationship with their spectators, as in Jorge Pineda’s skeleton

34 Suzanne Dovi, “Political Representation,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2014, [plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/political-representation](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/political-representation).



Figure 9. Sofia Gallisá Murierte, *Dead Man in a Ring*, 2014. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist

made of chalk, whose bones may be used by the audience to leave their own marks on the wall. Miguel Luciano's portrait kites were first activated by the artist in 2002 on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques—then a US Navy bombing range and military test site—as a way to trespass across the perimeter set up by the military. He later produced a series of portrait kites with undocumented youth in the United States, to fly at the National Mall in Washington, DC, and with children in Nairobi, Kenya (see fig. 8). For members of disenfranchised or impoverished communities, the sight of oneself flying through the air is no doubt empowering. Luciano's portrait kites celebrate youth and life and revel in the potential for change, and other artists also project an active and dynamic relationship with their surroundings or with others around them, as witnessed in Antonia Wright's hurling back first through panes of glass in the 2013 performance *Suddenly We Jumped*, or in Charo Oquet's tying herself up to a Haitian street vendor in *All Tied Up/Amarre* (2006). Representation is also frequently activated for the purpose of commemoration, such as in the work of Ebony G. Patterson and Steve McQueen, who memorialize murdered youths in Jamaica and Grenada, respectively. Sofía Gallisá Murierte documents Puerto Rican funerary practices in her ongoing project *The Business of Death* (begun in 2014). Meditating on the relation between representation and death, the artist films and photographs wakes where the deceased has been staged in a realistic setting, such as in a bar or in a boxing ring, according, in most cases, to their explicit instructions (see fig. 9).

These final moments with the body of the person being commemorated seem ready-made for television coverage and social media postings. They speak to a yearning for visibility that is shared among the dead and the living. Overall, through representational acts, artists comment on their own agency in relation to their race, gender, and sexuality and showcase the analogous ways they are enmeshed with the environments they inhabit.

A vision of “submarine,” rather than continental, unity animates our sense of the “subterranean convergence(s)” of the histories of the islands in the Caribbean.<sup>35</sup> Our archipelagic approach is therefore inspired by the opening of Brathwaite’s poem “Calypso”:

The stone had skidded arc’d and bloomed into islands:  
Cuba and San Domingo  
Jamaica and Puerto Rico  
Grenada Guadeloupe Bonaire<sup>36</sup>

If the idea of “undercurrents” captures the idea of subterranean, conjoined histories, the image of the “arc’d” line suggests a history that is both linear and circular, episodic and repeating, skidding across a horizon (the line delimiting the mixed currents of air-water) before blooming into is-lands (the old Norse word for “water-land,” *is-land*, evoking “the mixture of water and land at the limiting, or defining, coast”).<sup>37</sup> In its skidding and blooming it implies both motion and rest, the joined terrestrial and maritime perspective the archipelagic sensibility automatically brings as an assemblage of land and water, entangled landscapes and mapped, interconnected edges.

As we bring this reflection to a close, we will note that it is useful to maintain an awareness of the differences between island and continent as types of territories, and as spaces with converging and diverging Caribbean histories. For example, while a continental narrative tends to swallow up the insular perspective, as discussed above, it bears remembering that indigenous cultures for the most part did not endure on the islands, yet they are very much a part of the continental Caribbean.<sup>38</sup> This is a fundamental difference, courtesy of the colonial enterprise. Derek Walcott, speaking of West Indians, states that every citizen “has been severed from a continent, whether he is Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, or black.”<sup>39</sup> The statement holds true for the people of the insular Caribbean— Islanders who hail from elsewhere and for whom maritime culture is, more often than not, not an ancestral heritage. This makes the experience of Caribbean peoples inherently different from that of Pacific Islanders. For indigenous Polynesians, the sea was not a barrier, and voyaging depended on a millenarian knowledge of the interconnected trajectories between the movements of islands across the

35 Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Identity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Mona: Savacou, 1974), 64.

36 Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite, “Calypso,” *Rights of Passage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 47.

37 Marc Shell, *Islandology: Geography, Rhetoric, Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 18.

38 See Shona Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

39 Baer, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, 56.

sea and the stars across the sky. The late Polynesian scholar Epeli Hau'ofa posited that it was European colonialism that introduced the concept of islands as isolated, bounded entities. In the Pacific Islander worldview, "Oceania denotes a sea of islands with their inhabitants. The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. People raised in this environment were at home with the sea. . . . Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled, unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers."<sup>40</sup>

The Pacific provides both a counterpoint and a relevant analogy. Archipelagos may appear to be natural geographic formations, but in a Caribbean divided geopolitically and linguistically with different imperial pasts and constitutional forms, forging archipelagic connections is an intentional act. Archipelagic assemblages describe a performative geography, one that deliberately imagines the connectivities of the region, associations that extend to include Caribbean diasporas on mainland shores. As described by Elaine Stratford, Elizabeth McMahon, Carol Farbotko, Godfrey Baldacchino, and Andrew Harwood, "[An archipelagic assemblage] is not simply a gathering, a collection, a composition of things that are believed to fit together. . . . *Assemblages act in concert*: they actively map out, select, piece together, and allow for the conception and conduct of individual units as members of a group."<sup>41</sup> A vision of the archipelago as assemblage centers the insular Caribbean not as exclusive, isolated, bounded sites but rather as unique vantage points from which to view relational patterns that extend outward in multiple directions, horizontally linking island to island, island to continental mainland, island to ocean and sea, and islanders to each other across far-flung waters and shores. Relevant visual artwork plays a key role in capturing the syncretic undercurrents, intentional continuities, relational patterns, and analogous formations across a Caribbean network of island and diasporic imaginaries.

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40 Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 153–54.

41 Stratford et al., "Envisioning the Archipelago," 122 (emphasis ours).