

## New Provincialisms: Curating Art of the African Diaspora Leon Wainwright

Over the past decade there have been various curatorial attempts to assemble and understand the art of the African diaspora and to offer a more global sense of the histories from which such works emerge. The diaspora concept once promised fresh possibilities for imagining community beyond the nation; however, its internationalist emphasis has given way to a provincializing attitude grounded in United States – centered experiences. When art exhibitions are designed to mobilize the African diaspora and to reverse its traditional exclusion from art history and public memory, it is less clear whether such designs also prove capable of reversing the direction of this new provincialism. And yet, while the otherwise international relevance of the diaspora analytic has become susceptible to political and social priorities with a locus in the United States, much can be gained from interrogating the ways in which this locus generates new “margins” and “centers” in the world of art and blackness.

In Britain and the Caribbean such practices of provincializing can be seen with particular clarity. These Anglophone settings of the African diaspora stand apart from other European or South American ones, such as France or Brazil, because they are implicated in a shared language of curatorial practice and historical scholarship in relation to the United States. When United States – based attempts to increase the visibility of the African diaspora extend abroad, they penetrate these locations first and most freely. This is a pattern of influence that mirrors the Caribbean’s long-standing status as an American leisure resort and a convenient laboratory for U.S. studies of culture and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> In Britain, curatorial practices institutionalize the British-American “special relationship” in the field of the visual arts. They also draw on the defining conditions and struggles of the North American black experience. One example is the effort to “blacken Europe” by “making the African American experience primary” in European history, a concern with foregrounding the presence of North American ideas and practices — namely, in the areas of literature, social studies, politics, film, dance, and music — tracing how they have traveled to Europe and changed some of the latter’s traditional structures.<sup>2</sup> But if this shares anything with what Paul Gilroy has described as an “Americo-centric discourse” animated by “its extreme attachments to a reified notion of race,” then the prospect of historicizing an expanded, circum-Atlantic geography of the African diaspora — traced out in the field of art — is slipping from view.<sup>3</sup>

The curatorial turn toward diaspora has not delivered a fresh framework for thinking about art and blackness in any specifically international or transnational way. This is not without the efforts and legacies of those who have shown the courage to challenge the wider art history community for its weak participation in asking how blackness is to be thought about and remembered. There was a moment when attention to black popular culture and subsequently black visual culture seemed to offer

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<sup>1</sup> Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Heike Raphael-Hernández, ed., *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1 – 12.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilroy, foreword to Raphael-Hernández, *Blackening Europe*, xvi. Gilroy’s contribution to this volume is all the more fascinating for its cogent critique of the overall approach of its editor.

perspectives on the African diaspora that bore relevance beyond national borders.<sup>4</sup> These concepts' impact on art history and museum practice opened up entirely new critical areas, a discursive intervention of its time that reversed the critical gaze onto curators and art historians through sustained institutional critique. Yet this has been superseded by a more bounded, far less transgressive sense of the significance of the African diaspora in the context of art and visual culture. In the desire to seek out a definite break between diaspora and nationalism, sometimes, as Aihwa Ong has warned, the "complicated accommodations, alliances, and creative tensions" that exist between them can be overlooked.<sup>5</sup> The most widely visible frameworks for historicizing diaspora have been unable to maintain the separation from the national necessary to ensure their analytical and strategic usefulness, and spaces of curating are as much in danger of provincializing the African diaspora's diverse geography.

As we attempt to bring to light the growing global influence of the United States' domestic script on race, we can also recognize attempts by artists and curators to turn this orientation around. Even as the display and historiography of art found in the Caribbean and Britain share a familial proximity with those in the United States, this hegemonic arrangement also elicits some dynamic tensions, and the project of reconceptualizing a creative (visual) community is taking some novel shapes. Through curating and its concomitant practices of documentation there is the promise of dismantling and disavowing the hegemonic uses to which race and the diaspora concept have been put as founding categories of art historiography. Much might be gained from examining these competing areas of activity, as I do in what follows from the different directions of Britain and the Anglophone Caribbean.

### **Envisioning an American Locus for Africa: An Emergent Provincialism in Curating Art and Artists of the Diaspora**

What meanings should we draw from a London exhibition in 2005 that declared in its accompanying catalog that art and visual culture can help in "the rediscovery of Africa as black America's forgotten cultural locus"?<sup>6</sup> This was the leading premise for a major survey of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, entitled *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary*, staged at the publicly owned Whitechapel Gallery. Works by forty-seven artists, filmmakers, and photographers interacted over two gallery floors, filling the Whitechapel with a rich mixture of film and video, sculpture, print, text and image, photography, and painting. The ambition of its organizers — the freelance curators David A. Bailey of Britain and Petrine Archer-Straw of Britain and Jamaica, along with the Duke University – based art historian Richard Powell — was to elevate the African diaspora as a shared community of art and visual production implicating three national locations: the United States, Britain, and Jamaica.

A didactic sequence of themes was chosen for grouping the works: "Premonitions," "The World Is a Ghetto," "Tress/Passing," "Exploitation/Blaxploitation," "One Love," "By Any Means . . .," and "Lost in

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<sup>4</sup> See Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace* (Seattle: Bay, 1992); Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000); Michael Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Phoebe Farris-Dufrene, ed., *Voices of Color: Art and Society in the Americas* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997); bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Petrine Archer-Straw, David A. Bailey, and Richard Powell, eds., *Back to Black: Art, Cinema, and the Racial Imaginary* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2005).

Music/Through Space and Time.” The largely black American experiences indicated by these headings, a narrative of black social protest and political struggles and victories, were corroborated best in artworks, film, and ephemera from North America. Less in evidence were categories and groupings with a more local relevance to the art from Jamaica and Britain. This was despite the international makeup of the exhibition’s curatorial team, its London venue, and the several Atlantic locations from which its artworks were drawn. If indeed Africa was the site of black America’s “forgotten cultural locus,” as the show’s curators argued, then Back to Black gave the overall impression that Jamaica and Britain were being assigned their cultural locus in black America.

The press responses to Back to Black in the United Kingdom were rather mixed. An entirely positive response came from the writer Sukhdev Sandhu in the art magazine *Modern Painters*. For Sandhu, the exhibition demonstrated that British and Caribbean artists of the 1960s to the 1970s were centrally “formative to the black Atlantic experience.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast, another critic and photographer writing in the *New Statesman* confessed that he found the exhibition “deadly dull” and ridden with “cliché.”<sup>8</sup> The main reason for his dismissal was that much of the North American art shown was already well known through popular reproductions: many of these works were by the best-known personalities of the North American black arts and music scene, and the exhibition featured them heavily in its publicity, in its main room, through a montage of album covers and video shorts, and in a compilation CD on sale in the gallery foyer. The prominence of these figures and works created a conspicuous disparity in emphasis. With much more established symbolic capital in the mainstream representational field, the North American material overshadowed the Jamaican or British works and asserted a far greater congruence with the exhibition’s overall “black art” theme.

If displaying the North American images in the same exhibition space as works from the Caribbean did not achieve the outcome of a transfer of value or capital across the pieces, the same held true of the relation among visual works emphasizing elements of Rastafarian iconography and an accompanying verse from Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song,” enlarged on a gallery wall. Marley’s text only thinly informed viewers of the complex biblical and Yoruba strands in works by the artist Osmond Watson, for example, in his three bas-reliefs in wood: *Madonna of Stony Gut* (1971), *Revival Kingdom* (1969), with its very subtly colored patina, and *Ogun, God of War and Metal* (1976), complete with metal inserts. The iconography of Marley’s song also presented the difficulties of associating the exhibition’s pieces with a visual record of Rastafarianism shaped much more by mass production and glib promotion. Additionally, if these works have yet to reach the wider attention of international art audiences, that desire was very much in competition with the more common associations viewers were likely to draw between the Jamaican art in the exhibition and tourism. Contributions such as Christopher Gonzales’s messianic self-portrait, with subreferences to the tropes of Zion in his later wood busts, and Mallica “Kapo” Reynolds’s paintings are the sort of items that visitors would easily find imitations of in Jamaica’s Montego Bay, Ocho Rios, and various other entry points to the island from Caribbean cruise ships. The commercial status of these contexts — iconic North American black art, the market ubiquity of Jamaican musicians such as Marley, and the lingering resonance between certain artworks and tourist curios — meant that the Jamaican objects were assembled on an uneven plane.

The treatment of the British images in Back to Black failed to differentiate between British and North American black histories. A catalog essay by Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd on Vanley Burke, the photographer of everyday scenes in the inner city of England’s West Midlands, explored Burke’s

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<sup>7</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu, “Say It Loud: Going Back to Black,” *Modern Painters*, July–August 2005, 70–73

<sup>8</sup> Larry Herman, “Deadly Dull,” *New Statesman*, July 4, 2005, 42 – 44.

contribution in the context of connotations of the ghetto. This ghettoization both literally and figuratively frustrated the aim of bringing Burke's images out of a forgotten corner of art history. Subsequently, Beauchamp-Byrd's concluding claim was vague: "Above all, Burke's images reveal, in their startling range of expressiveness, how self-construction, pride and a tremendous sense of place may flourish, far beyond the boundaries marking those realms known (and variously represented) as 'ghetto life.'" <sup>9</sup> Reading these images from afar with an assumption of their racial exclusivity, Burke's "histograph" images as he calls them — scuffed terraces, Old World and penned in — might look just like shots of a ghetto, but this analysis alone ignores how black people in Britain have shared their neighborhoods and poverty with those of many other ethnicities, such as in Burke's Victorian working-class streets that are home to the poor of all kinds, or in postindustrial slums indifferent to any readable racial geography. <sup>10</sup>

Back to Black, according to its logic, could not engage productively with the fact that not all stories about creativity and blackness begin and end in the United States. The Back to Black exhibition catalog made generalizations that, during the period of the 1960s and 1970s, "there was an implicit recognition among most peoples of African descent," and "messages of national liberation, black power, black beauty and black pride became important all over the world during the period covered by this exhibition."<sup>11</sup> But the relationships of "equivalence" between North American, British, and Jamaican artists of various diasporas are more complex than this portrait allows. Back to Black did not attempt to show blackness when it has been renegotiated to meet local concerns, or when racial self-essentialism encounters serious strategic limits. <sup>12</sup> Since Britain's black art moment of the 1980s, market forces and public patronage have demanded representations of blackness that emphasize a recognizable version of cultural difference and diversity, one that would reify race in the art gallery and fracture the historical bonds of solidarity among British artists of many ethnicities.

As such, Back to Black broke from the curatorial custom of examining the degree of a given artist's identification with blackness. Equally, it avoided asking why certain artists have historically chosen not to identify themselves with such terms of difference. In so doing, it left aside conventions of documentation and display that would elucidate a distinction between contexts of visual meaning in the past and those of the present. Drawing on a cultural politics in which a concept of race is present but abstract, it elided the deep differences between issues faced by African American communities and those of minorities and imagined communities elsewhere. Rather than attempting to explore why these national histories are, perhaps predictably, mismatched, Back to Black elided discontinuities of experience and overemphasized the centrality of North American blackness for British and Caribbean art histories. If the exhibition became misleading on the historical value of its art, it weighed that loss

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<sup>9</sup> Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, "Everyday People: Vanley Burke and the Ghetto as Genre," in Archer-Straw, Bailey, and Powell, *Back to Black*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Sealy, *Vanley Burke: A Retrospective* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Archer-Straw, Bailey, and Powell, *Back to Black*, 18; Paul Gilroy, "'No, I Do Not Have the Right to Be a Negro': Black Vernacular Visual Culture and the Poetry of the Future," in Archer-Straw, Bailey, and Powell, *Back to Black*, 168.

<sup>12</sup> The term *black art* has a particular British history that the exhibition also ignored. As early as 1978, the presence of Pakistan-born Rasheed Araeen (a Black Panther, pamphleteer, artist-activist, and the author of *A Black Manifesto* [1978]) set in motion two decades of activity among other South Asian "black" artists for whom the U.S. Black Arts Movement offered blueprints for resistance on British soil. This period showed how the meaning of black art can be extended to include works by individuals both of the South Asian and the African diasporas. See Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto," *Black Phoenix* 1 (1978): 3 – 12, reprinted in Rasheed Araeen, ed., *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala, 1984), 73 – 97.

against the gains of making a display of this scope accessible for the first time in Britain. Indirectly, Back to Black demonstrated that the most vigorous and best-resourced treatments of art of the African diaspora are those that bear the deep imprint of conditions and struggles over race and racism in the United States. The occasion placed that national setting at the forefront of the ways in which the remaining regions of the African diaspora are contemplating their art history and the discourses of race and blackness they are compelled to negotiate.

The Back to Black story of U.S. influences serves to place the Caribbean and Britain at an outer circle of black cultural identification. In this visual economy of blackness, a diffusionist model of black history passes unquestioned: a vision of black culture as emanating from a single place to take seed internationally, like a migration (or even a diaspora) of diaspora consciousness. This implies that certain regions of the African diaspora lag behind an ostensible vanguard of black cultural heritage epitomized at a North American epicenter. Its influence works along the same lines as the “modern blackness” or racialized vision of citizenship that Deborah Thomas has suggested took hold in Jamaica’s public sphere during the late 1990s through youth culture and African American popular culture.<sup>13</sup> As a spatial-temporal scheme, this diffusionism is hegemonic, presenting art history and cultural modernity through a myth of a modernizing, progressive transition. If we are to take seriously what Dipesh Chakrabarty has suggested about historians of world history, that an underlying supposition “makes it possible to identify certain elements in the present as ‘anachronistic,’ ” then curatorial spaces can also be complicit in ordering the African diaspora into reputedly “leading” metropolitan centers and belatedly “backward” and “secondary” peripheries.<sup>14</sup> Implicit in any such art display is the suggestion that those descendents of Africa who are not living within the shores of the United States should consider the advantages of adopting its modes of representation.

### **Tracing the Dynamic Geographies of Diaspora: The Lives and Works of Entwined Transnationalisms**

Certain alternative curatorial approaches to understanding the works and artists of the African diaspora appear better able to describe key aspects of this multivalent form of creative experience. They purposefully steer away from vocabularies and terms of evaluation drawn from United States – based realities and the portraits resulting from such hegemonic approaches. By emphasizing those artistic subjects and artworks that physically connect or entwine Britain and the Caribbean, these alternatives radically expand the art historical record by transgressing its traditional attachments to nation and place.

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<sup>13</sup> Deborah A. Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12. That spatial conceptions of “outsiderness” and the exotic in anthropological thought have been tied to temporal conceptions is examined at length by Johannes Fabian, who suggests that “the temporal discourse of anthropology as it was formed decisively under the paradigm of evolutionism rested on a conception of Time that was not only secularized and naturalized but also thoroughly spatialized. Ever since . . . anthropology’s efforts to construct relations with its Other by means of temporal devices implied affirmation of difference as *distance*.” Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 16.

In 1998, the very same Whitechapel Gallery of the Back to Black exhibition held a major retrospective of the career of the artist Aubrey Williams (born 1926), who made his first visit to Britain from British Guiana, now Guyana, in 1952. During the 1950s and 1960s Williams was dogged by the parochialism of London viewers who were unwilling to embrace his art without circumscribing or predetermining its significance, a phenomenon he struggled to overcome.<sup>15</sup> Williams's art was also included in the Back to Black exhibition, due to his ostensible place in the black diaspora. In 1998 that paradigm of belonging was treated very differently; in a retrospective of the artist that constructed him as embodying the very condition of transnationalism, the show not only undermined the older, parochial attitudes of Williams's London audiences but also contradicted the values of the new provincialism by refusing to place concerns with diaspora at the center of its historical analysis. The exhibition Aubrey Williams comprised a wide range of his works, including images of tropical flora and fauna and his three great series of abstract and figurative paintings: a body of canvases from 1969 to 1981 focusing on the chamber and orchestral music of Dmitry Shostakovich; his *Olmec-Maya* series (1981 – 85) reflecting on South American mythologies and the petroglyphs of Carib, Warrau, and Arawak peoples that he knew from the Guianas; and his *Cosmos* series from 1985.

Displaying the breadth of his practice, and supported by extensive biographical research, the Williams exhibition made it easier to see that Britain and Guyana have always had a peripheral status in the history of North American black art, as well as a different relation to blackness. The exhibition was a reminder of how Williams — like so many of his peers who had sojourned or settled in Britain to pursue their artistic futures — persisted in distinguishing himself from any overt or single racial identification. If the artist declared his entire career to have been an attempt to disentangle himself from a “European connection” (“All my life I have been trying to get rid of it”), he would also emphasize his mixed European, African, and Amerindian heritage, while the sophistication of his works themselves confounded a reading of any obvious racial identity.<sup>16</sup>

Another alternative to United States – based understandings of art and blackness can be found in the work of the Small Axe Collective. Founding members include the writer Annie Paul and the artist Christopher Cozier, both based in the Anglophone Caribbean, and the Jamaican-born political anthropologist David Scott. Positing a “Caribbean platform for criticism,” a leading interest of the collective is to explore the sphere of visual creativity to disrupt a rendering of the Caribbean as a provincial zone. Its journal and curated online space have sought to promote an ongoing “conversation” about the region's postcolonial future, looking beyond the limits of an anticolonial and diasporic political and cultural architecture.<sup>17</sup> The collective presents the grounds for a refusal to be conscripted to local and national terms of historical explanation found within the Caribbean and resists paradigms of modernity imposed from outside the region.<sup>18</sup>

In September 2006 the Small Axe Collective met with a public opportunity to examine ways in which art in Trinidad might be brought into dialogue with prevailing attitudes around ethnicity, locality, and

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<sup>15</sup> See Anne Walmsley, ed., *Guyana Dreaming: The Art of Aubrey Williams* (Coventry: Dangaroo, 1990); Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement: 1966 – 1972* (London: New Beacon, 1992); Andrew Dempsey, Gilane Tawadros, and Maridowa Williams, eds., *Aubrey Williams* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts and the Whitechapel Gallery, 1998); see also Rasheed Araeen, “When the Naughty Children of Empire Come Home to Roost,” *Third Text* 20 (2006): 233 – 39.

<sup>16</sup> Williams qtd. in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> See the collective's Web site at <http://www.smallaxe.net/>.

<sup>18</sup> An account of the wider political history of this relationship with reference to modernity is given in David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

historical memory. This opportunity came with the launch of Galvanize, a series of artists' projects and events that happened alongside the largely state-funded, Caribbean-wide exposition Carifesta. Galvanize was not part of or in receipt of any of the allocated public money for Carifesta, and instead made resourceful use of an existing media base, including daily television interviews during the program's opening weeks, a mutually annotating web of Internet sites designed and written by publishing professionals, and features in globally distributed art magazines.<sup>19</sup> Assuming the title Visibly Absent, Galvanize set out to provoke thought on the strategies of racial and ethnic pluralism that have shaped anticolonial nationalisms in the Caribbean and that persist through representations such as Carifesta, Trinidad's annual carnival celebrations, and the island's local infrastructure for the arts and education.

A more recent curatorial project, *La Fantasie*, staged in Trinidad during late January and February 2008, further distanced contemporary artists from the ideologies that emerged in the Caribbean during decolonization.<sup>20</sup> Set in the former middle-class suburb of Belmont in the capital Port of Spain, the project used a single-story structure with added facings as an installation site to suggest a modest imitation of the wooden "jalousies" of an elite colonial residence ([click here to see an image of La Fantasie](#)). Filling its darkened, nightmarish interior with place-specific works that combined photography, painting, and sculpture, its group of artist-curators invited visitors to enter at their peril using a handheld fluorescent light. *La Fantasie* was installed at 41 – 43 Norfolk Street, directly opposite the local constituency office of the country's ruling political party, the People's National Movement. This detail sharpened its deliberate affront to the liberal-rationalist fantasy of national prosperity that enervated the independence era: the dream of becoming urban and middle class and of owning a "Fantasie" home of one's own. In addition to the "underlying engagements with domesticity, settlement, abuse, and violence" of *La Fantasie*, the installation elaborated on the theme of an earlier video sequence created by Christopher Cozier in which repeating images of social housing units are played against a radio broadcast of Trinidad and Tobago's anthem.<sup>21</sup> Together these references to the politics of dwelling serve to question the value of Trinidad's scripted national development: a planned racial pluralism that attempts to determine how ethnic differences are mapped onto the national landscape.

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<sup>19</sup> The Galvanize project used a detailed and creative Web site presented in the format of a rolling diary of events and documentation (see <http://www.projectgalvanize.blogspot.com>). This was cross-referenced at the locally authored site of Caribbean Contemporary Art, Art Papers (<http://www.artpapers.blogspot.com/>), and in the program of film screenings (<http://www.studiofilmclub.blogspot.com/>), as well as on numerous other sites globally. Philip Sander, "Talking It Through," *Caribbean Beat* 83 (2007): 34 – 36; Courtney Martin, "Galvanize, Port of Spain, Trinidad," *Flash Art* 251 (2006): 46.

<sup>20</sup> The artists who participated in the project were Jaime Lee Loy, Marlon Griffith, and Nikolai Noel, who together form the Collaborative Frog (see [thecollaborativefrog.blogspot.com/2008/02/la-fantasie.html](http://thecollaborativefrog.blogspot.com/2008/02/la-fantasie.html)); see also Nicholas Laughlin, "La Fantasie," *Caribbean Review of Books* 15 (2008): 26 – 27.

<sup>21</sup> The *La Fantasie* description can be found at [thecollaborativefrog.blogspot.com/2008/02/la-fantasie.html](http://thecollaborativefrog.blogspot.com/2008/02/la-fantasie.html). The video sequence reappears in the documentary by Richard Fung, *Uncomfortable: The Art of Christopher Cozier* (2005); see also Richard Fung, "Uncomfortable: The Art of Christopher Cozier," *Public* 31 (2005): 16; and <http://www.digipopo.org/content/uncomfortable-the-art-of-christopher-cozier> (accessed April 21, 2008). Aspects of the video are taken up in later work by the Trinidad artist Dean Arlen, and it is tempting to read Cozier's description of these houses as a comment on his own initial use of the motif. As he writes: "Ranks of little generic house shapes symbolize government-provided housing developments and imply the discomfort of the economically displaced, who also face new, unfamiliar social relations and environments." Christopher Cozier, "Boom Generation," *Caribbean Review of Books* 11 (2007): 21.

The contrast in meaning between the images of *La Fantasie* and the photographed streets of Vanley Burke in which black and white British subjects coexist could not be more pronounced. Yet such crucial discrepancies between these contexts in the African diaspora would not be conspicuous under a provincializing gaze. Whether in Britain or in Caribbean locations such as Trinidad, each of these projects indicates how curators and artists remain unconvinced of the expediency of placing blackness at the center of attempts to establish the historical sovereignty of art making and display, thereby differing from United States – based interventions in mainstream art history with their insistence on the theme of race. There is a contribution to a more intersectional idea of art history that is missing from accounts of difference as either racial, or social, or gendered, and so on.<sup>22</sup> They ask what new questions emerge when the commas between these constructions are erased, making for a closer sense of how urgently visual encounters demand the comprehension of social relations and historical structures of power as permuted by multiple, conjunctive, and layered identities. In a related effort to go through and beyond the national, these initiatives have continued to explore collaborations that transcend the balkanized political geography of the African diaspora. Above all, they undertake to free art making and display from discourses of essential cultural or racial uniqueness, from the racialized vision of citizenship represented by the “modern blackness” that Thomas has observed. They trace out alternative transnational geographies that, from a provincializing perspective, have passed unrecognized.

Identifying such countercurrents begins to undermine the universalizing trend in curatorial representation in which certain nationally based conceptions of race, culture, and ethnicity are made to appear like a global rule. The repercussions of such universalism are being felt across the transatlantic African diaspora and deserve to be made transparent. Above all, it is the continuing reluctance of diaspora communities to misrecognize themselves in any “outside” image that animates negotiations with the new provincialism and that is most likely to shape their future within radical curatorial practice.

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<sup>22</sup> They share the approach of a special issue of *Signs*, “New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture,” coedited by Jennifer Doyle and Amelia Jones, which insists on “the intersectionality of gendered experience as inherently, simultaneously, and irrevocably raced, classed, sexed, and so on.” Doyle and Jones, “Introduction: New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture,” *Signs* 31 (2006): 608. A related contribution made in the field of literary studies is Houston A. Baker Jr., ed., “Erasing the Commas: RaceGenderClassSexualityRegion,” special issue, *American Literature* 77 (2005)