The Grounds of Erasure: Patricia Kaersenhout's Archival Vision

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Visual forms, from the picturesque to the ethnographic, from the figurative to the primitive, overlay our impression of the Caribbean. A tropical paradise, a carefully organized garden, lush and fecund, washed in aquamarine blues and golden hues, the Caribbean islands seem to call up a vast bank of imagery.[1] What is it that we see in these images? Or what is that we do not see, for the Caribbean is also a place almost entirely erased from memory. As Jill Casid and Krista Thompson both have shown, European theft of land from its Indigenous owners led both to their genocide, and a landscaping of the islands into something new: a place whose very ecological form now bore the imprint of colonial expansion from the transplantation of new forms of vegetation to the deforestation of the land. Both of these practices served the commercial interests of European colonial administrators and planters of course, making way for new commodity frontiers as European demands for raw – and refined – crops like sugar and cotton accelerated, and provided the means for sustaining the region's new natives, enslaved Africans.[2]

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[1] For some recent scholarship examining this bank of imagery see Krista A Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Patricia Mohammed, *Imaging the Caribbean : Cultural and Visual Translation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Mia L Bagneris, *Coloring the Caribbean: Race and the Art of Agostino Brunias* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2018); Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1999); Lindsay J. Twa, *Visualizing Haiti in U.S. Culture, 1910–1950* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2014); Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003); T. J Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, eds., *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2007).

[2] Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (U of Minnesota Press, 2005); Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, 1–91.

As historical events and documentation coalesced into visual representation the Caribbean became a region where erasure was enacted violently (as in the destruction of native peoples), and where erasure also became a form of representation to mask this violence which was elided and pushed to the margins, or forgotten altogether. So if erasure is a filter through which we have learned to see the Caribbean, then the tropes used to depict, describe and market the Caribbean that began with the onslaught of European colonization, materialize this process of erasure. Smooth painted strokes, sketchy charcoal lines and the inky grooves of the burin used to represent the Caribbean restage these histories of rupture as aestheticized forms.

In *Food For Thought*, Patricia Karsenhout recalls and restages some of this visual archive, creating a series of five prints that reference imagery in which meanings about the Caribbean have been visualized by the correlation of Black and Brown women's bodies with the landscape. This is a well-established art historical trope of course, the association of nature with the female body, but it has particular significance for the New World.[3] Visualizing the feminization of nature allowed Europeans to recast the lands they stole, domesticating their violent possession as domestication, management, a kind of taming. The theft of land mirrored their exploitation of the Black enslaved people they brought to cultivate the islands. The fecundity of the land, resource rich and profitable, found its physical corollary in the reproductive labor of Black enslaved women.[4]

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[3] See for example Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Gendering Landscape Art* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

[4] See in particular Mohammed, *Imaging the Caribbean*; Amar Wahab, *Colonial Inventions: Landscape, Power and Representation in Nineteenth-Century Trinidad*, New edition edition (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

The five prints evoke these correlations between Caribbean women on the plantation and the natural world. We have all seen them. Women posed with the fruit of their labors, in front of lush vegetation, perhaps a child nearby or on the hip. Women carrying baskets of goods on the way to market. Women buying and selling, behind them green fronded palms and the aquamarine sea. Women standing beneath trees, near waterfalls, framed by sugar cane. As their bodies visualizes and reinforce the idea of the Caribbean as tropical, lush, abundant, their subjectivity slowly disappears. This is the paradox: their visuality comes at the expense of their erasure.

For Kaersenhout erasure is the essence of the violence inflicted on the region, both a product of the colonial histories of indigenous genocide, slavery and indentureship and a process that speaks directly to the ongoing legacy of these structural histories in our neoliberal present. In her art practice, she begins in places where this colonial violence is registered, focusing in particular on the archival transformation of flesh into numerical figures. These archival repositories document the Caribbean as economic sites, and as Black and Brown bodies are merely accounted for while their lives remain silenced, we see how acts of erasure accumulate, materializing something like Derek Walcott's paradoxical description of the Caribbean as a site amnesia.[5] Archival remains – accounting books, plantation ledgers, bills and receipts – measure out and articulate the silencing of history and the fragmentation of the past. For Walcott these acts of erasure also mark the beginning of Caribbean art, among whose purpose it is to reconstruct these fragmented histories.

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[5] Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," NobelPrize.org, December 7, 1992, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/walcott/lecture/; Emily Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 44–48.

We can see Kaersenhout's work finding its own origin moment in precisely this way, as she grapples with the paradoxical visuality of erasure and its implications for the lives and experiences of Black Caribbean women. How do we see what is not there, and how does what is not there shape what it is that we do see? Working from these spaces of deep and profound loss, Kaersenhout's aims are not redemptive. She is not trying to create cohesion out of dislocation, but to materialize both what this colonial violence has erased, and what it means to see from, and through, these elisions. In the face of a memory of forgetting, Kaersenhout works to show how these histories of violence are registered on, and through, the bodies of those forgotten and elided. In art works that have limned the boundaries between two and three-dimensional art forms and between installation and performance, she works speculatively to invoke alternate histories that unfold from experiences untold in official narratives. That is to say she works from this process of erasure, reinforcing the failure of the official archive to adequately narrate histories that are fragmentary.

Using these elisions, she draws attention to the fleeting and often visceral moments from the lives of those lost. While she foregrounds the experience of enslaved Black Caribbean women, whose lives were central to the plantation economy for their reproductive and physical labor in *Lose Your Direction* (2010) and *History of Grief* (2016), she also makes work that brings other marginalized communities into view such as in her examination of Native American history in *Les Eclaireurs* (2009). My point is that her work begins in the wounds of the past, and uses these visceral spaces to create other, missing, images of historical experience. In working through the erasure of the archive, and asserting the corporeality of those lives gone missing, she also returns us to the ways these histories are enacted, and remembered, on the body, on the flesh

itself. For Kaersenhout it is important to assert this fleshly disruption, to challenge narratives – especially in Europe – that see this history of violence as something that has been overcome. Drawing on feminist scholar Gloria Wekker, Kaersenhout sees her work as directly challenging the dissonance between self-image and reality as it exists in Dutch – and Euro-American – society in which racial discrimination and colonial violence are denied, yet are continually restaged in public discourses of xenophobia, racism and anti-immigration.[6]

Archival erasures have material implications. They mandate a position that figures these histories of colonialism and slavery as having been overcome. While the history of colonialism and plantation exploitation is memorialized, their centrality to the social relations that continue to shape the Caribbean becomes less visible. This obscures in the Caribbean, and in the diaspora, the continuing legacies of the violence erasure structures in constituting Black subjectivity. These are legacies enacted on the flesh, enacted in forms of mundane and banal horrors, enacted as anti-black violence, misogynist and homophobic terrorizing. These legacies also take the form of being unthought.[7] This might be both a form of forgetting, but it might also be a refusal to acknowledge these as horrors.[8]

For Kaersenhout being unthought is a materialization of the suffering that attends this process of erasure, as it has structured the experience of Black women in the Caribbean, and how

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[6] Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

[7] As Saidiya Hartman has formulated, drawing on Hortense Spiller's theorization of captive flesh, black flesh figures as an inner register of violence against Black diasporic subjects, that has emerged from slavery but continues as slavery's after-life. Saidiya V Hartman and Frank B Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201; Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

[8] Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.

they continue to structure their experience still. Being unthought is a kind of violence enacted ontologically and epistemologically. It is to not be seen. It is also to understand that one's experience of this erasure cannot be known, cannot be fully formulated conceptually because its foundational moment – the brutality of plantation slavery – remains elided in official historical archives. Returning to the flesh – as a site of suffering – has been a way of rupturing these registers of denial, while also asserting other possibilities for envisioning the experience of Black women.[9]

In *Food For Thought* (Fig 1, Kaersenhout, Food for Thought) the artist returns to the paradox of visibility and invisibility in a slightly different way. The work consists of a series of portraits, rendered digitally and printed on cotton. Five in all, they are composites of figure and ground with each woman inserted into an already composed scene. Each woman is centered as she carries out work of some kind: picking vegetables, hoeing furrows, driving a tractor. She is shown amidst some natural surroundings that we have come to associate with the Caribbean. In one there are palm trees, in another sugar cane, and in others we see cotton fields and a vegetable garden. The collage-effect of the prints is registered, self-reflexively, in a careful disconnection between background and foreground. These women are clearly out of place, a fact enhanced by their clothing which is not made for outdoor labor. Once we look more closely at their countenances the disjuncture is complete. These are mid twentieth-century Black feminist intellectuals Claudia Jones, Suzanne Cesaire, Elma Francois, Gerty Archimede and Paulette Nardal.

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[9] For more on the possibilities and precarities of Black flesh as a site of suffering see Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737–80.

By positioning these women in poses that recall the Caribbean's visual histories, Kaersenhout makes a visual connection between these structures of erasure – associated with the colonial archive – and our contemporary understanding of Black radical intellectualism in the Caribbean. The work was created in response to the Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris in 1956 where leading Black intellectuals came together to discuss issues of slavery, colonialism and Négritude.[10] As Kaersenhout realized this event, while largely organized by Black Caribbean women, centralized the voices and intellectual concerns of Black men, even though many of the debates drew from the intellectual work of women. Paulette Nardal – one of seven sisters, and one of the first Black women to study at the Sorbonne – and her sister Jeanne were the first intellectuals to theorize the key concepts of Négritude, organizing literary salons that brought together many Black intellectuals in 1930s Paris. Yet, it is Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas who have largely been credited as the fathers of the movement. Similarly the critical writings of Suzanne Césaire have also by and large been overshadowed by that of Aimé, despite her crucial involvement in the development of Afro-Surrealism and her role as editor of the francophone Caribbean journal *Tropiques*. Elma Francois, Claudia Jones and Gerty Archimede were all key activists and politicians whose contributions to Afro-Caribbean intellectual thought and Black communism have also been downplayed, marginalized or forgotten.[11]

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[10] Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Interview with Patricia Kaersenhout, August 28, 2018.

[11] For more see Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2012); Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2002); Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Los Angeles: Univ of California Press, 2018); Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

These women were part of a heterogeneous collection of intellectuals, artists, scholars and workers spread across the Caribbean and Europe. The writings and teaching emerging from this generation sought to overturn epistemological violence of the Caribbean's colonial past, and their anti-colonialism also laid the ground work for new constructions of Caribbean identity and movements for self-government.[12] In *Food for Thought*, we see how the politics of a radical sort of visibility also bear the strictures of the very genealogy of erasure they were seeking to transform. This is not to downplay the significance of such politics, but to highlight how these these processes of erasure structure the very conditions of their disavowal.

To emphasize this entanglement, Kaersenhout's portraits create connections between these Black women's (unseen) unacknowledged intellectual labor and female plantation workers whose double exploitation was naturalized, and nativized, within the landscape. Black women's labor underpinned the plantation economy, and by extension the history of capitalism. But here shown working – picking fruit, carrying cotton – and calling to mind the ways Black women's labor went under the radar, these twentieth-century figures also call to mind how labor provided Black women with certain forms of mobility such as the ability to cultivate products to support themselves on the plantation or at market.[13] In other words, the labor of these women – intellectual and economic – is meant to reinforce their modernity. This is particularly foregrounded in the print of Claudia Jones (Fig 2, Kaersenhout, Food For Thought, Claudia Jones) who red-jacketed and hands outstretched towards overhanging corn is juxtaposed with ghostly figures of enslaved women. While they are her foremothers and their position as

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[12] Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 52–68; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, And The Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 241–406.

[13] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, 2004), 112–15.

unthought figures structures her own, perhaps the modernity of a figure like Jones can help us see the modernity of the women behind her, a modernity registered, cruelly, on the flesh.

By creating a temporal interplay between foreground and background, between figure and ground, Kaersenhout on the one hand reinforces the relationship between archival erasures and forms of invisibility. These modes of not-seeing, of being unthought, restage forms of historical violence that cannot be disconnected from the brutality still enacted against Black womens' bodies, in the Caribbean and the diaspora. This is reinforced by her use of cotton as the ground for the printed image. Cotton not only underpinned colonial expansion in the Caribbean, it framed the commodification of Black enslaved bodies, as both currency and slave clothing. The historical equivalence of cotton and Blackness is also suggestive, as if in this instance cotton might take the place of Black flesh itself. Thus this history of commodification and of labor, underpinned by the body of the enslaved, is here literally enacted on the works' material ground. But this interplay is also a way of disrupting the forms of visuality that have created this erasure in the first place. Using a digital process of cutting and pasting, Kaersenhout draws on a vast body of Caribbean landscape imagery that she splices with black and white photography of these Black women, whose images are harder to find.[14] In this sense she works in, and from, the wound of erasure itself, compelling us to see, again, the disjuncture of what is visible and what is not.

Influenced by Communist posters from the mid-twentieth century, and interested in these women's involvement in anti-capitalist movements, Kaersenhout disrupts these visual lineages further by her use of color and the positioning of the figures against the background. In their

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[14] Arabindan-Kesson, Interview with Patricia Kaersenhout.

technicolor hues, they are positioned so as to be projected out of the foreground, almost larger than life. Referencing the composition of these communist propaganda posters – particularly in the portraits of Gerty Archimede on a tractor and Elma Francois picking cotton (she was a cotton picker as a child) (Fig 3,4, Kaersenhout, Gerty Archimede, Elma Francois) – Kaersenhout collages two vastly different sets of imagery: the visual language of elision, associated with Caribbean landscape imagery, and the visual language of hyperbole associated with propaganda. While formally they seem to function as the inverse of each other, Kaersenhout has grasped their similar ideological purpose as modes of communication that rely on emotional appeal through the repetition of specific motifs (the smiling worker/the domesticated slave for example) and specific visual conventions (the scale of figure to ground or framing devices to focus lines of sight).

Creating these connections through a collaged aesthetic, Kaersenhout creates a new visual language, a new genealogy of visuality perhaps, from which she is able to commemorate – by bringing them out of the margins – these Afro-Caribbean women. Their commemoration, like historical portraits, grounds them while allowing them the space to transcend the limits of particularity, the limits of their erasure. Printed on cotton – a material for which, and by which, colonial violence was enacted across the Caribbean – these prints reassemble the relationship between visual representation, forms of memory and histories of colonial violence. They reimagine and reenact new histories of Afro-Caribbean women's work on the ground that these erasures took place. Beginning from the site in which women's bodies were unthought – erased and this erasure formed into history – *Food For Thought* envisages an alternative assemblage of visuality that centers the role of Black women in our perceptions of the Caribbean.