

# *Art and the Postcolonial Imagination: Rethinking the Institutionalization of Third World Aesthetics and Theory*

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## I. Introduction

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THINKING on art and aesthetics performs a number of well-rehearsed discursive moves decipherable in the trajectory of cultural studies and beyond. All these discursive traditions — we treat three below — have contributed enormously to our understanding of the role of art in contemporary life, influencing a generation of “first world” critics in profound ways. Yet, a major — indeed debilitating — constraint here is the overarching suppression or displacement of the structures, agencies, and trajectories of the colonized inhabitants of the “third world” and the periphery of the first. The tendency in such criticism is to disavow or silence the historical specificity and productivity of postcolonial narratives and genealogies in artistic practices and cultural forms, a crucial and paralyzing elision, as we will stress throughout.

The first discursive move has its precursors in the work of Frankfurt School theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and more recently Jurgen Habermas. This move can be described as *anti-populist*. Proponents of this antipopulism construct a tight, hermeneutically induced homology between modern aesthetic objects and practices and capitalist wish fulfillment. The modern art object is located squarely in the metropolitan centre, its elaboration of capitalism, and its sinuous culture industry. Modern art by this process is so compromised by the routinization and mass-mediated processes of the culture industry that it is said to have lost its unique capacity to critique or instruct.<sup>1</sup>

The second discursive move in contemporary critical studies of art is linked to a more charitable view of contemporary art. This discursive move is *pro-populist* (McGuigan) and can be genealogically traced to the alternative wing of the Frankfurt School in treatises such as Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and more recently to Cultural Studies of the Birmingham School in England and its analogous traditions in Australia, Canada, the US, and elsewhere. This discursive move of populist hermeneutics sees contemporary art as participating in necessary processes of political resistance and counter-hegemony, offering the masses a way out of capitalism's debilitating logics.

The third discursive move distinguishes itself from the previous two by suggesting a temporal and spatial shift in human sensibilities, the nature of capitalism and, alas, art, toward a postmodern condition in which the homological connection between art and society is problematized and ultimately severed, releasing new radical energies of multiplicity, irony, and destabilization. This approach to contemporary art goes under the banner of *postmodernism*. Postmodernist cultural critics, such as Christopher Jencks, see this phase of contemporary life as ushering in a new millennium in which all hierarchies in the aesthetic world and in society will be overcome by computerization of work, communications, and aesthetic form. In the postmodern move, art does not imitate life — life is aestheticized and art is the genetic code for the elaboration of new forms of existence and care of the self.

At best then these discourses of anti-populist, pro-populist, and postmodern criticism can name an archive of tropes, themes, and motifs into which the aesthetic creations of the third world are collapsed as instances of the Baudrillardian counterfeit, the copy that desires the place of the original — the seat of the King — having no real aesthetic or intellectual home of its own. Postcolonial art therefore arises, through what Homi Bhabha calls a "time lag," in the tracks of the more hegemonic art discourses of the West, a harlequin archetype patched together at the beginning from borrowed robes, a figure colliding with domination's undertow and wrestling anxiously to the

surface for air. In this essay, we offer some thoughts and heuristics towards a new understanding of postcolonial art, attending to its historical specificity and productivity in careful and, we hope, richly suggestive ways. We pay special attention to how these works of art challenge received curricular practices, including the institutionalization of “postcolonial theory” in English literature departments as well as the humanities more broadly (Hall). The separation between art forms and practices into neatly delineated disciplines is, we maintain, an illusion which belies the dynamic history of dialogue between postcolonial artists and intellectuals around and across the globe.

Some definitions are in order before we go any further. As used in this essay, the “post” in the postcolonial is not to be understood as a temporal register as in “hereinafter” but a sign and cultural marker of a spatial challenge and contestation with the occupying powers of the West in the ethical, political, and aesthetic forms of the marginalized. Uneven development between the metropole and periphery plays itself out in aesthetic form, in ways that problematize colonial/postcolonial networks of power relations as well as the Cartesian stability of subjecthood fabricated in and through these relations. Postcolonial art forms — and we include the work of novelists, playwrights, painters, and musicians here — are products of colonial histories of disruption, forced migration, false imprisonment, and pacification. These practices are of such an extreme and exorbitant nature that the claim of authority over knowledge and of narrative fullness can only be treated as a hoax intended to deceive its audience and produce self-denial. This “post,” as we conceive it, ultimately specifies a co-articulation of colonial and postcolonial histories, not a self-serving separatism and isolationism.

In what follows, we discuss some critical features of postcolonial art by analyzing the work of a number of artists from the third world and from the periphery of the metropole. We focus here on the paintings of Arnaldo Roche-Rabell of Puerto Rico, Gordon Bennett, an Aboriginal artist from Australia, the Haitian-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, Wilson

Harris of Guyana, and African-American novelist and Nobel laureate, Toni Morrison. From time to time we make ancillary references to other artists as is relevant. We choose to foreground these artists because we think that their work best illustrates some of the important features of the postcolonial art that we discuss in the rest of this essay.

We particularly want to highlight three important motifs and directions of the work of postcolonial imagination and draw a few conclusions. These three motifs in postcolonial art can be summarized as follows:

First, we want to highlight postcolonial art's vigorous challenge to hegemonic forms of representation in Western models of classical realism and technologies of truth. In these models of realism and verisimilitude, a hierarchy of discourses preserves the subjectivity of the Western actor. These dynamics are to be found as much in seventeenth-century oil paintings and in nineteenth-century novels as in today's popular Hollywood filmic fantasies and documentaries as well as in the social sciences and humanities. In these hegemonic discourses, the colonial/postcolonial subject is susceptible to what Frantz Fanon calls the "bane" of Western objectivity. The anti-realist critique of postcolonial art offers a philosophical and performative indictment of the ruling narrating subject of Western forms. In the cultural form of postcolonial artists, quite literally and metaphorically, the eye of the third world is turned on the West, and the horizon of view is deliberately overpopulated with polyglot angles, perspectives, and points of view.

Second, the work of art in the postcolonial imagination effectively rewrites the narrative of modernity and modernization in which a binary logic attempts to exhaust the field of the West and Empire by creating oppositions of "centre" and "periphery," "developed" and "underdeveloped," and "civilized" and "primitive." The eye of Western art is anthropological in its gaze upon the other (Clifford). Primordialism is associated with the most thoroughgoing rationalism and logocentrism when visited upon the third world subject. Yet, the story of modernization in postcolonial art is a story of the yoking of opposites in which the Enlightenment perspective is always underlaid by



subterranean acts of atavism and brutality. In response to dominant narratives of modernity, postcolonial art draws on the codes of double and triple register so deeply and historically entrenched in the survivalist practices of the dominated (Gilroy). Culture, for these artists, is a crucible of encounter, a crucible of hybridity in which all of cultural form is marked by twinnedness of subject and the other.

Third, the work of postcolonial artists foregrounds modes of critical reflexivity and thoughtfulness as elements of an emancipatory practice, one in which the artist is able to look upon his or her own traditions with the dispassion of what Walter Benjamin calls “melancholy.” This skepticism is linked to an attempt to visualize a sense of community in which criteria for membership are not given a priori in an inherited set of characteristics or a political platform. For artists like Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, Gordon Bennett, and Wilson Harris, change can only take place when all preconceived visions and discourses are disrupted and disturbed. They suggest that transformative possibilities are not given. They must be worked for — in often unpredictable and counter-intuitive ways.

These three *motifs* — *counter-hegemonic representation*, *double or triple coding*, and *emancipatory or utopic visions* — help define the postcolonial aesthetic. They work across aesthetic forms, including literature, visual art, music, and poetry, challenging the kinds of artificial separations that increasingly serve only the imperatives of academic institutions. Our more integrative approach, we maintain, has particularly strong implications for rethinking received curricular knowledge.

As Gauri Viswanathan argues, the institutionalization of English literature did not begin in England, but rather in India, where it was a key means by which the English were able to maintain their colonial control, helping to manage and regulate the conduct of colonial subjects in a way that physical force alone could not. The seeming neutrality of these carefully selected texts, as she demonstrates, allowed the English government to proselytize without seeming to violate the clear separation between church and state — and thus the transcendent invisibility of its power. The result was ever-more subtle

ways of justifying and absolving a brutal colonial regime, of turning “the rapacious, exploitative, and ruthless actor of history into the reflective subject of literature” (23).

Both postcolonial literature as well as postcolonial criticism have critiqued this project from within — for the most part — literary paradigms. As Stuart Hall suggests, “the ‘postcolonial’ has been most fully developed by English scholars, who have been reluctant to make the break across disciplinary (even postdisciplinary) lines” and explore other kinds of questions, including economic ones (258). We argue, however, that the very separation between literature and other art forms is an illusory one, challenged by the histories of dialogue that have gone on between these artists, their ideas, and their work. We maintain that a more fully developed set of motifs will allow us to look beyond the institutionalization of the postcolonial in literature departments and in the humanities, a move supported by artists themselves, in practice. Drawing on our three motifs, we interrogate how dominant representations have consolidated in the humanities curricula and how postcolonial art offers a profound challenge here, destabilizing fixed notions of identity through double- and triple-coding, and offering new possibilities for exploring this literature and these artistic creations as a space for the exploration of difference — not as a problem but as a resource in service of emancipatory ends. Such an approach, we argue, is one fruitful avenue by which to challenge the ways that postcolonial theory has become ensconced in certain depoliticizing institutional practices.

## II. The Critique of Hegemonic Representation

Traditions of colonialist aesthetics — for example, in the art of the novel or perspectival oil painting — have presented a free-standing subject at the heart of aesthetic work and an equally coherent and fully integrated subject in the implied reading/viewing intelligence (Berger; Belsey). As Gayatri Spivak argues, even when the work of antimodernist/postmodernist writers foregrounds narrative collapse, it is the narrative collapse of a singular overmastering voice.<sup>2</sup> Rather, what we find in the work of the postcolonial artist — in painters such as Gordon

Bennett, or the Guyanese painter Aubrey Williams, or Indrani Gaul from India, in writings such as Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, Isabel Allende's *House of Spirits*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* — is the effort to visualize community, a new community of fragile or broken and polyglot souls. In contrast to the anti-modern/postmodern critics and artists mentioned earlier, the self is always already embedded in communal — though hybrid and multiple — imperatives here. There is always an effort to link individual will and fortune to collective possibility.

In this regard, the deliberately oversize oil paintings of Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, published in the catalogue entitled *Arnaldo Roche-Rabell: The Uncommonwealth* (Hobbs) are particularly illustrative of the struggle to construct identity and subjectivity from the fragments of an agonizing and tragic historical past and present. Indeed, Roche-Rabell has worked in a period of intense anxiety over the fate of Puerto Rico as a "commonwealth — of the United States." He was born in Puerto Rico in 1955, three years after the island was "allowed" to adopt its own constitution, one that allowed self-governance but stipulated a "voluntary association" with the US — a dubious distinction. His oeuvre, writ large, documents multiple efforts to come to new and unpredictable terms with the complex and often contradictory social, economic, and cultural questions at work in debates around the island's future. Roche-Rabell's concerns with the politics of identity and anticolonialism are prosecuted in the creation of larger than life figures that often seem buried or interred in deeper structures or forces. His concern with the twinned or doubleness of personality and flawed subjectivity connects themes of anticolonialism to themes of refusal of coherent subjectivity. Puerto Rico's history of colonization has produced repressed demons and monsters as he illustrates in the canvas mural "Poor Devil," in which the face of the devil projects from the head of an intensely blue-eyed human (33).

One can trace these concerns and practices across a range of traditions and historical contexts, including in the work of postcolonial African-American novelists such as Toni Morrison (who, incidentally, addresses concerns similar to "Poor Devil" in *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, published in 1970). Morrison's

novels, most notably, mine a broad range of literary and vernacular traditions — from the Judeo-Christian Bible to the work of Shakespeare to African-American Spirituals to African folklore to blues and jazz and beyond. In this polyglot, alchemical manner, Morrison forges a vision of black communities that are both fragile and highly resilient, communities girded by bodies of tradition that are always open and subject to multiple manifestations. Her characters enter the fictive world as partial, fragmented, constructed selves ceaselessly reconstructing the past in the present, and always in an open-ended and protean fashion. Her work thus represents an important departure from the masculinist African-American novelistic tradition (see, for example, Richard Wright's *Native Son*), which linked the certitudes of black identity and community to narrative realism.

Morrison's communities are fragile, as are the souls that inhabit them. Key here is the ironically titled *Paradise*, which details the horrific and violent lives of several black women in a recently founded all-black — and thoroughly patriarchal — town. Amid all the tension and contingency in this novel as well as others, Morrison's characters always maintain, or perhaps perform, some kind of fragile and contingent cohesiveness between and among themselves. Community-building is always fraught and fragile, and always threatens to erupt into violence. As Morrison writes in *Jazz*, "People look forward to weekends for connections, revisions and separations even though many of these activities are accompanied by bruises and even a spot of blood, for excitement runs high on Friday or Saturday" (50).

This search for identity is thus a search for a collective self, one that connects the disenfranchised to multiple traditions, both globally and locally. This hybridity, so evident in the work of artists such as Gordon Bennett, Toni Morrison, and Nicolas Guillen, allows for the transformation of key binary oppositions privileged in the brutal colonial imagination. These include most notably, West versus East, North versus South, the high versus the low, the civilized versus the primitive. Transcending these binary oppositions allows these artists to rework the very pivotal center versus periphery distinction which has so under-girded the iconography and social sciences of Western intellectuals,

allowing these artists to look beyond its strictures to new histories, new discourses of new ways of being.

Yet another example of the emphasis on plurality and multiplicity that one finds in the work of third world artists is the celebration of epic Indian ritual in everyday life in a corner of the Caribbean. For insight on this play of New World/Old World identities, we turn to the work of the St. Lucian playwright, Derek Walcott. In his 1992 Nobel lecture, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," Walcott talks about taking some American friends to a peasant performance of the ancient Hindu epic of Ramayana in a tiny village on the Caroni Plain in Trinidad. The name of this village is the happily agreeable, but Anglo-Saxon, "Felicity." The actors carrying out this ritual reenactment are the plain-as-day East Indian villagers spinning this immortal web of memory, of ancientness and modernity. Here, Walcott is "surprised by sin" at the simple native world unfurling in its utter flamboyance:

Felicity is a village in Trinidad on the edge of the Caroni Plain, the wide central plain that still grows sugar and to which indentured cane cutters were brought after emancipation, so the small population of Felicity is East Indian, and on the afternoon that I visited it with friends from America, all the faces along its road were Indian, which as I hope to show was a moving, beautiful thing, because this Saturday afternoon Ramleela, the epic dramatization of the Hindu epic of Ramayana, was going to be performed, and the costumed actors from the village were assembling on a field strung with different-colored flags, like a new gas station, and beautiful Indian Boys in red and black were aiming arrows haphazardly into the afternoon light. Low blue mountains on the horizon, bright grass, clouds that would gather colour before the light went. Felicity! What a gentle Anglo-Saxon name for an epic memory. (1)

The world on the Caroni Plain integrates the ancient and modern, as Indian peasants historically displaced to the Caribbean create in their daily lives a re-memory of their past before modern colonialism. In so doing, they add an extraordinary ritual and threnodic nuance to the folk culture of the Caribbean as a whole. In the art of living, these East Indian peasants triumph over the imposed history of marginalization and the middle-passage history of indentureship.

This vitality of multiple origins and connections informs the theatre that Walcott, ultimately, envisions for a Caribbean breaking with European hegemonic norms of representation. He offers a powerful set of tropes for an equally powerful social vision:

In the West Indies, there are all these conditions — the Indian heritage, the Mediterranean, the Lebanese and Chinese. . . . When these things happen in an island culture a fantastic physical theatre will emerge because the forces that affect that communal search will use physical expression through dance, through the Indian dance and through Chinese dance, through African dance. When these things happen, plus all the cross-fertilization — the normal sociology of the place — then a true and very terrifying West Indian theatre will come. (310)

Walcott — like so many other postcolonial artists — challenges the ways the colonial imagination has sought to constrain third world subjects in reductive and simplistic discourses of racial and national origin (McCarthy). These discourses, as we have noted elsewhere, have consolidated in curricular projects in the West — multicultural and otherwise — projects which have sought to quell the unpredictable noise of dialogue which is the inexorable and interminable state of contemporary identity formation (McCarthy and Dimitriadis). These artists allow no such easy closure, challenging us to look to new — and less prefigured — representational practices.

### III. The Strategy of Double Coding

The work of the postcolonial imagination, as realized in Walcott's theatre, Morrison's novels, and Roche-Rabell's paintings, is characteristically marked by specific modes of operation and meaning construction. We have discussed one above. This brings us to a discussion of the second motif we want to highlight — the strategy of double coding. By double coding we are referring to the tendency of the postcolonial artist to mobilize two or more plains or fields of idiomatic reference in any given work, what Wilson Harris calls "the wedding of opposites." The postcolonial artist may therefore quote or combine the vernacular and the classical, the traditional and the modern, the

cultural reservoir of images of the East and the West, the first world and the third, the colonial master and the slave. Here, again, we want to differentiate this strategy from the type of double coding that postmodernist critics such as Charles Jencks talk about when defining postmodernism. Instead of foregrounding the collapse of master narratives of individualistic or maverick imagination, we are pointing to the collective purposes, collective history, the visualization of community which constitute the central issues at stake within the postcolonial artistic project.

This strategy of double coding is powerfully foregrounded in the work of the Aboriginal painter Gordon Bennett. Through his art, it seems, Bennett, the son of an Aborigine mother and European father, comes to terms with the profound personal and political issues historically surrounding identity formation in Australia. Bennett came to art relatively late in life, graduating from art school in 1988, the year Australia celebrated the bicentennial of European settlement. His work registers the attendant tensions and concerns. We foreground here one of his pivotal paintings, "Outsider," which combines the methods of Aboriginal pointillism and Western perspectival painting to stunning effect. This painting ironically quotes and densely refigures Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night" and "The Bedroom," replacing their tense calmness with an atmosphere of brusque, startling anxiety. His double coding of the West and native traditions exposes an unsettling environment of cultural hegemony. Bennett, most important, interposes a new scenario into this "Starry Night" setting: a decapitated native body stumbling towards a blood-besmirched cradle on which lay two classical Greek heads. The ground of essential Aboriginal and hegemonic Anglo-Australian identities is now populated with trip wire questions located in this motif of double vision and hybridity. The work of hybridity unearths the symbolic violence of Australian history and the brutality of European "discovery" and domination of the native. At the same time, through this double coding, Bennett highlights the incompleteness of the modern Aboriginal search for identity. To be homeless in one's home — to paradoxically sit on the rich inheritance of these

cultural markers and symbols — is the postcolonial condition *tout court* (McLean and Bennett).

Bennett himself uses art as a profound pedagogical tool — one which challenges the histories taught to him from a very young age, including the story that Captain Cook “discovered” Australia as an empty land — Terra Nullus (as Bennett calls one of his paintings). This history stood in powerful contradistinction to the more hybrid reality he lived, though it was a reality maintained and sustained every step of the way by a colonial education system. Bennett stresses the importance of opening up alternative kinds of histories, alternative perspectives on Australian history, in art. He speaks of one self-portrait as a “visual text trying to open up history, to say there are other perspectives that are possible” (*Black Angles*). Yet the power of this work lies not simply in presenting other versions of history. Rather, Bennett opens a space where the very project of constructing history from a single perspective is called into question. Note the constant stress on multiple lines of vision — typically three — in his work. Bennett offers a profound challenge to contemporary educational movements, movements which seek merely to insert “other stories” into already existing curricula in an additive fashion. His project of double coding dominant motifs — of destabilizing coherent origins — is significantly more powerful and provides more fruitful avenues for those interested in constructing curricula relevant to the complex lives of the disenfranchised.

Hence, postcolonial painters, musicians, writers, and poets have all wrestled with the available tools of the colonial imagination in prosecuting new and complex identities. This process of revision and recoding does not — cannot, in fact — privilege absolute origins; it is less concerned with Hegelian dialectics than with Bakhtinian dialogues (Hall). One finds similar imperatives in the paintings of Arnaldo Roche-Rabell who recodes the work of his Puerto Rican and European antecedents alike. Specifically, Puerto Rican nationalist Carlos Raque Rivera’s famous “Hurricane from the North” became Roche-Robell’s “Hurricane from the South,” while Van Gogh’s well known images of sunflowers became fodder for “Five Hundred



Years Without an Ear.”<sup>3</sup> The former painting inverts the discourse of Northern imperialism, opening up a space where power can be viewed less as a repressive than a productive force, a tool that can be deployed in multiple practices of the self. The latter enters a writhing, polyangular and perspectival body in a field of vicious-looking sunflowers, serving both as a metaphor for Roche-Rabell’s debt to the European tradition as well as its profound pains. The work of both Rivera and Van Gogh seem equally important to Roche-Rabell in his project of personal and political interrogation.

This deconstruction of dominant representational practices so associated with the centrality and security of authentic origins and subjectivities — the hierarchy of “high” and “low” — is realized most explicitly in the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat (Marshall). Basquiat’s early career was as a graffiti-artist in New York City, painting SAMO — that is, “Same Old Shit” — on myriad public spots throughout Manhattan. Basquiat was part of the burgeoning and (then) vibrantly multiethnic hip hop cultural movement in New York City, a movement which integrated in equal measure rap music, break-dancing, and graffiti writing — in fact, Basquiat produced a single featuring rapper Rammellzee (Dimitriadis). While his work contains numerous references to these and other cultural signifiers, Basquiat’s work draws, most interestingly and with great complexity, on the jazz idiom. Its artists and their themes pepper his works, from bop drummer Max Roach to singer Billie Holiday to (especially) saxophonist Charlie Parker.

This should not be surprising. The entire history of black diasporic art in the US would be inconceivable without the jazz idiom (see, among others, the work of Romare Bearden). Basquiat, however, separates his work on jazz from much of the idiom’s modernist imperatives (for example, see the extended compositions of Duke Ellington), as it is decidedly non-representational, not driven by modernist concerns with coherent textuality, nor with the prosecution of stable cultural identities (the kinds traditionally realized in Afrocentrism). One need only look at “Charles the First,” a composition Robert Farris Thompson calls “pivotal,” to understand this (37). “Charles the

First," a tribute to jazz great Charlie Parker, has no narrative core. Like many of his works, its energy comes from the apt juxtaposition of radically divergent cultural signifiers. "Charles the First," in short, does not tell a simple story nor does it have a singular theme.

As Thompson points out, this is the first of many triptychs (compositions with three panels) which Basquiat would produce. The evocation of the number "three" has played an important role in jazz, most especially in the work of composer Charles Mingus. Mingus opens his 1971 autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, by stating, "In other words, I am three." One is reminded, as well, of his album titles which include "Mingus, Ah, Um," and "Me, Myself, an Eye." The word play on Latin conjugation in the former and referentiality in the latter point to the strategies of "triple coding" so much a part of jazz, a music that thrives not on original compositions but "riffs" on standards. Jazz, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out, is a music of signifying, a music that explicitly rejects the "original" in favor of constant intertextuality (in fact, Gates links these concerns to the entire history of African-American literature in his now-canonical text *The Signifying Monkey*).

Hence, Basquiat's title — "Charles the First" — points both to the kingly status of this jazz great as well as the ultimate futility of being "the first" anything in jazz. The point is driven home by the reference to "Cherokee," a standard pop tune written by Ray Noble, which would be revised by Parker as "Ko-Ko" and "Marshmallow." The futility of origins is evidenced, as well, in the wry "copyright" logo placed dead center in the middle of the second panel. Destabilizing the authority of origins — implicit in coding — was and is a technique crucial to postcolonial artists attempting to envision a third or intertextual space of form.

It is this condition of multiple heritages and its open possibilities that the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris similarly mines in novels such as *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975), and *Carnival* (1985). Indeed, Harris deploys strategies of double coding throughout his work, as illustrated in his *Palace of the Peacock*. Here, the fusion of the

colonized and colonizer subject is at the epicentre of his novel, a novel about the psychological reintegration of opposites in the conquistadorial search for the mythical colony of Mariella, located in the hinterland of Guyana, on the northeast corner of the South American continent. As the principal character Donne and his ill-fated polyglot crew sail up the Cuyuni River in their tortuous journey to reclaim this colony, they discover the subtle and abiding links and trestles of association between each other and the world:

Cameron's great-grandfather had been a dour Scot, and his great-grandmother an African slave mistress. Cameron was related to Schomburgh (whom he addressed as Uncle with the other members of the crew) and it was well-known that Schomburgh's great-grandfather had come from Germany, and his great-grand mother was an Arawak American Indian. The whole crew was a spiritual family living and dying together in the common grave out of which they had sprung from again from the same soul and womb as it were. They were all knotted and bound together in the enormous bruised head of Cameron's ancestry and nature as in the white unshaved head of Schomburgh's age and presence.

(*Palace* 39)

In this strategy of double coding, the postcolonial novelist works from medium to medium to tell a story that attacks the centrality and security of authentic or original subjectivity and the hierarchy of discourses associated with the inheritance of the classical realism as well as the bureaucratic deployment of characterization in the nineteenth-century novelist tradition. Wilson Harris's "Idiot Nameless" in his *Companions of the Night and Day*, Jorge Luis Borges's "Cartographers of the Empire," and the Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas's twisted characters (who in the middle of his novel *Grave Yard of the Angels* announce their dissatisfaction with their lives and ask the author for different roles) are all examples of this double coding. The ultimate argument these authors make here is that modern humanity and modern life are necessarily interdependent and deeply hybrid. The text of the underside of modernity and modernization is a quilt, a patchwork of associations, repressed in the philosophies of reason associated with enlightenment discourses and best exposed through strategies of ambiguity and

triple play. This text provides a necessary challenge to the ways colonial powers have sustained and maintained their "regimes of truth" through common curricula and their reliance on "reason" as a means of social control (Viswanathan).

So far, we have looked at both the critique of hegemonic representation as well as the strategies of double coding which are a central part of the postcolonial aesthetic. We have isolated these motifs and marked them as unique, distinguishing them from the three discursive traditions with which we opened. We want to look now, more specifically, at how histories of oppression have informed these motifs and their attendant discursive lives, how a brutal history of colonialism has necessitated the proliferation of utopic visions which also mark this art.

#### IV. Utopic Visions

The third and final theme of the postcolonial imagination we want to pursue in this section of our essay is the link between art and emancipatory vision. We argue that postcolonial art is engaged in what C.L.R. James calls in *American Civilization*, "the struggle for happiness." By this James meant the struggle of the great masses of postcolonial peoples to overcome plenipotentary powers and glean from everyday life a sense of possibility, a stimulation of a Calibanesque reordering of contemporary social and cultural arrangements. Here, we call attention to the effort to link the techniques of persuasion within aesthetic form to the struggle of third world people for better lives.

In this regard, the paintings of Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, as in "I Want To Die As a Negro" (Hobbs 49), suggest the reclamation and the reintegration of the repressed identity of Africa in the Caribbean space. One is reminded here, as well, of Nicolas Guillen's "The Ballad of the Two Ancestors" (Guillen 143-44). Also worthy of note is Roche-Rabell's "Under the Total Eclipse of the Sun" (Hobbs 45) in which body parts and human faces seem to rise from the shadowed landscape of the city acropolis. Here, we see foregrounded the temporary eclipsing of the power of the United States Congress that refuses to listen to the voices of the Puerto Rican people. In a similar manner, Korean

artist Yong Soon Min offers viewers a strikingly multilayered installation, "The Bridge of No Return," in which she explores the parallel realities of the separated peoples of Korea (North and South) and their latent desires for reintegration across the divides of perspectives and territory (Min 11). Min foregrounded the multipurpose and deliberately ambiguous nature of her Bridge installation when it was on tour at the Krannert Museum in Champaign, in the Fall of 1997. Min's "Bridge" is a statement of relationality and interconnectedness but also of inbetweenness and alterity:

A bridge is, by definition, a connection, fostering a relationship between the two otherwise separate sites at either end. A bridge also exists as its own entity, as an interstitial space to be traversed, presumably in both directions. A bridge of one-way passage, of no return, with no connection, no exchange, no continuity, defies the logic of a bridge like an oxymoron. (Min 11)

This latency courses through the play of divisions of all races and peoples at the end of the twentieth century. It is this latency that is foregrounded in the painting "Terra Nullus" (McLean and Bennett 88) in which Gordon Bennett projects the footsteps of the Australian Aboriginal people high above the implanting of the British Union Jack on the aboriginal landscape in the creation of Australia.

The art to which we refer here and throughout does not offer the viewer clear solutions to complex problems. Unlike many nationalist art movements (for example, black neorealist film in the US and earlier proponents of Negritude movements such as Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire), this work is marked by contingency, raising questions more than offering firm solutions. Hence, Roche-Rabell does not offer the viewer an answer to the problem of Puerto Rico's commonwealth status. In works like "Hurricane from the South," he points to its myriad complexities and how they have registered on his psyche and in the political consciousness of the island. Following Walter Benjamin, Roche-Rabell and others forge visions that can sustain and nurture a communal consciousness, though always in qualified and contingent ways. These artists

work hard for their momentary victories but are sober enough to realize that struggle is not simple nor will victory come in one fell swoop. One is reminded of Gordon Bennett's "Prologue: They Sailed Slowly Nearer" where the history of colonial oppression is configured in pop-style pointillism, pointing to the contingency of historical formations and the possibility of new and different futures.

The persistent reminder in these works is that emancipation has to be built and constructed from the bottom up. There is no predictable flow of effects from artistic wish fulfillment, vanguard theory or politics to the fruition of social solidarity and the realization of a new community. Writers like Harris maintain that the new community must be built in the ordinary, in the everyday production of difference, cobbled together, piece by reluctant piece — only then can the process of dialogue and reintegration of opposites take place. The "Palace of the Peacock," the site and ground of the play of difference, can only come into view in the labour of the artisan, not in the edicts and a priori declarations of theorists and pundits.

Indeed, these writers suggest that we, like the characters in Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, must all give up something here, perhaps even allowing our self-interests and crass identities to be scrutinized, wrecked in the process of transformation. This is the path of revision and reconciliation that Donne, the ram-bunctious colonizer and cattle rancher, must go through in the anteroom of the Palace:

Every movement and glance and expression was a chiselling touch, the divine alienation and translation of flesh and blood into everything and anything on earth. The chisel was as old as life, old as a fingernail. The saw was the teeth of bone. Donne felt himself sliced with this skeleton — sawed by the craftsman of God in the window pane of his eye. The swallow flew in and out like a picture on the wall framed by the carpenter to breathe perfection. He began hammering again louder than ever to draw the carpenter's intimate attention. He had never felt before such terrible desire and frustration all mingled. He knew the chisel and the saw in the room had touched him and done something in the wind and the sun to make him anew. Fingernail and bone were the secret panes of glass in the stone of blood through which spiritual eyes were being opened. (102-03)

Donne's turmoil is the turmoil of the contemporary world. It is the turmoil of the colonizer and the colonized in search of new possibility, a new home.

A utopic theme raised in the writing of Cornel West and Gina Dent bears upon the link between the work of the imagination and the realization of change. West and Dent discuss the difference between the individualized celebration of incorporated aesthetic work versus the vital dynamic of visualizing community which they see embodied in popular arts committed to alterity. They summarize this distinction in the tension between what they call artistic "pleasure" versus communal "joy," a distinction that holds for much postcolonial art. Pleasure is a personal and atomized kind of enjoyment, one that has been explicitly linked to certain kinds of psychoanalytic, filmic, and especially feminist, cultural criticism.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, as noted, postcolonial artists have always seen the self as deeply interred in community, making such atomized models entirely anomalous and untenable. Postcolonial artists have struggled, rather, for "joy," the experience of pleasure in and through collective contexts, a point made throughout this essay. Such art takes joy in envisioning new ways for collective struggle, new political possibilities, new ways of being and acting. It is suggested by artists like Roche-Rabell, Bennett, and Basquiat and writers like Harris, Morrison, and Lamming that this work is not complete. For them, the means of struggle is as important, if not more so, than the ends. Transformation cannot be dictated. Transformation is a process in which people work together to build change without the false security of guarantees.

This art and these artistic practices look beyond the atomized treatments of individual icons and works which have come to mark so much contemporary educational reform and curricula. The histories of dialogue and struggle which have marked the "work of art in the postcolonial imagination" can be linked to broader struggles for freedom, struggles which cannot be understood from within simple disciplinary confines, but must speak — by necessity — between and beyond them. These are, inexorably, political projects that do not fit neatly into, to echo Hall, disciplinary or even postdisciplinary structures. They are

part of a broader human struggle, taking place across multiple sites of encounter.

### V. Conclusion

Contemporary postcolonial art vigorously places art at the centre of the struggles for happiness of people of the so-called developing world but also of diasporic peoples scattered across the peripheries of the developed countries of the West. These contradictory, hybrid and utopic texts agonize about identity and present the future as an open ground of possibility and negotiation. Postcolonial artists critique the authority over knowledge foregrounded in the imperialist canonical text and the hegemonic wish fulfillment of the political, cultural, and knowledge-producing systems of the West. They instead allow us to glimpse a world of the future conquered by difference and the polyglot voices of the marginalized and oppressed. It is this world that Wilson Harris alerts us to at the end of *Palace of the Peacock* when Donne and his colonizer/colonized crew begin the excruciating negotiation and encounter with their submerged others and repressed selves:

The crew was transformed by the awesome spectacle of a voiceless soundless motion, the purest appearance of vision in the chaos of emotional sense. Earthquake and volcanic water appeared to seize them and stop their ears dashing scales only from their eyes. They saw the naked unequivocal flowing peril and beauty and soul of the pursuer and the pursued all together, and they knew they would perish if they dreamed to turn back. (62)

The best intuition in postcolonial art, thus, is the recognition that a journey of encounter, of dialogue and reintegration, must take place across the battle lines of difference and ethnocentrism in a multicultural world that races into the twenty-first century.

Postcolonial art — taken in its multiplicity — looks beyond the disciplinary structures which have come to define so much work in the academy, offering a reconsidered and reconceived vision of what academic work might look like. To return to this special issue's theme, "Institutionalizing English Studies: The Postcolonial/Postindependence Challenge," we have argued



here that much work in postcolonial theory fits perhaps too comfortably in disciplinary and even post disciplinary literary paradigms. We argued here that these arts can only be understood in dialogue with each other, that it is insufficient to deem them — as so many do — “other arts” (Ashcroft et al. 1). Such efforts to separate out different aesthetic forms are fruitless, challenged by the work of artists themselves, in practice. This is an undeniable reality, one that cannot be ignored in favor of maintaining institutional status quo. Postcolonial art looks to a broader human vision, a vision of emancipation that is open and — most important — not prescribed.

## NOTES

- 1 See Adorno 119-32; Held 77-110.
- 2 See, among others, Christopher Jencks's *What is Postmodernism?*, Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*: Vol. 3, David Lodge's *Changing Places*, and the work of painters such as the postconceptualist Barbara Kruger.
- 3 See Hobbs 5-23 for a fascinating discussion of the Puerto Rican artist's background sources of influence.
- 4 See, for example, Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) and much of the contributions to the film theory journal *Screen* done in the 1970s.

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