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Transfigurations

The story told by Stuart Hall of how C. L. R. James, émigré writer from Trinidad, cast his eyes back and forth between the play on the cricket field before him to the postcard reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* held in his hand suggests an individual's unique way of thinking and seeing.[1] But it also speaks for a transatlantic dynamic of vision, developed in the migrations of the Caribbean diaspora, which reshaped cultural identity and the arts in the twentieth century. James wrote about what he saw in the movement of his eyes between cricket match and painting from the perspective of a man steeped in the colonial cultures of Trinidad and England, inspired by the mass movements against fascism evoked by Picasso's painting, and convinced of the historically creative forces embodied in the players and the painting. His transatlantic vision, capable of linking such seemingly disparate visual events, characterizes a recurring obsession with seeing in the work of writers from the Caribbean throughout the twentieth century.

In this book, I analyze the work of twentieth-century writers and artists who have crossed from the Caribbean to Britain and, in some cases, Europe and the United States. Their work – in the form of sculpture, fiction, poetry, essays, and drama – centers, often obsessively, on acts of vision. These may be social acts of seeing, inner vision, or reflections on visual art. However, they all emerge from the migration of people and their cultures generated by British, European, and US colonization in the Caribbean. Most importantly, they illuminate the significance of vision to one of the major intellectual shifts of the twentieth century – the refiguring of identities across national, racial, and cultural boundaries.

The condition of exile and diaspora experienced by Caribbean émigrés, from the early 1900s to the present, has generated a radical transformation in the subjectivity of the writer; in many ways, it has recreated the Caribbean writer's identity as one who has gained the power to see and, thus, to create.[2] In 1960, the Barbadian writer George Lamming portrayed the social

relationship involved in vision by referring to Shakespeare's Caliban. Describing Caliban as an emblem of the colonized person, Lamming writes: "Caliban is never accorded the power to see. He is always the measure of the condition which his physical presence has defined."[3] For Lamming, the "power to see" grants the Caribbean writer a claim to language and artistic agency. Derek Walcott, poet from St. Lucia and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, has also stressed the importance of vision to Caribbean writers, declaring that "only our own painful, strenuous looking, the learning of looking, could find meaning in the life around us."[4] James, Lamming, Walcott, and others such as Wilson Harris, and more recently, Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar repeatedly address the conditions of enslaved or indentured ancestors who were denied the power to see and used – as commodified objects of a market gaze, picturesque figures in a tropical paradise, or visual markers of nineteenth-century racialist categories – to constitute that power in others. In their writings, they reconstruct visionary subjectivity for these ancestors and their descendants. They also address, sometimes as a literal impairment of the eyes, the blindness of the imperial project. Caribbean writers thus engage the dynamic of vision as a transforming element in the process of cultural decolonization and, through it, claim the authority of their own perceptions. This authority became increasingly possible during the colonial movements for political independence of the early and mid-twentieth century. In the post-independence era, Caribbean writers and artists have continued to produce their own traditions of what Walcott has recently termed "the art of seeing"[5] in sometimes conflicted interaction with the international cultures of modernist, postmodern, and postcolonial literatures.

The topic of vision may seem to contradict the usual emphasis in Caribbean cultural studies on sound, orality, and music, as exemplified in studies by Kamau Brathwaite, Carolyn Cooper, Paul Gilroy, and Dick Hebdidge – but it does so by questioning the categories of sensory perception that implicitly guide them.[6] They have shaped in crucial ways the development of cultural studies and, more specifically, our understanding of Caribbean diasporic cultures, and they provide points of departure for my project. However, they risk replicating colonialist philosophies of discrete, hierarchically organized sensory development. Especially in the eighteenth century, at the height of the slave trade, these philosophies constructed the European man as the universal modern Subject, imbued with reason and, most significantly, the capacity for sight. Rather than celebrating, in opposition to this construction of modernity, the sound cultures of the black Atlantic, I begin, instead, with the creation in Caribbean literature and visual

art of modernist countervisions. In my readings, early twentieth-century Caribbean sculptors and writers confront vision directly: they reflect on its role in determining the European man as the universal Subject; they create alternate, creolized figures of Caribbean visionaries; and they *see through* the double-bind of colonial imitation to which eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy condemned them, achieving in the process visual subjecthood and creative agency. I then analyze the moves made by postcolonial Caribbean writers to work through and beyond the valorization of sight to an indiscrete sensory language, one in which poetic devices such as *synaesthesia*, *ekphrasis*, and *apophasis* create alternate ways of being and knowing, while re-imagining history and narrative temporality outside the "posts" of current (including my own) critical chronologies.

Throughout the twentieth century, Caribbean artists and writers have thus contributed to a reformulation of vision that often anticipates, re-contextualizes, and frequently contests mainstream philosophical and theoretical investigations into visuality. From the beginning of the century their arts of seeing have helped to shape what we have called modernism, extending it into a transatlantic politics of vision and an extraordinary postcolonial literature. Emerging from this literature, an aesthetic of trans-figuration re-imagines the sensory body and discovers in the footnotes – literally, as we shall see – of the dominant philosophical tradition the half-present, vanishing and reappearing "ghosts" of modernity. The artists and writers I discuss in this book gain the "power to see," but more than that, they transform vision itself as the basis for being and knowing, "extending the senses," in Wilson Harris's words, to trans-figure lost bodies of civilizations and humanity.

Modernism, the Visual, and Caribbean Literature thus opens a larger perspective in which to understand the ongoing literary creation of an alternate sensory body that counters the visual practices associated with European colonialism. It also makes evident the impact of an extended creolization within literature and the arts in which the indigenous and inter-African diasporic arts of the Caribbean help to shape European and, in the case of this study, twentieth-century British culture. More precisely, creolized Caribbean arts have made what has been called "British" culture part of a more extensive circum-Atlantic cultural network that did not begin, but certainly intensified, with the slave trade and its twin, modernity.[7]

MODERNITY, SLAVERY, AND SIGHT

As an example of one of these vision-obsessed works by a writer from the Caribbean, we can turn to a recent novel by David Dabydeen, *A Harlot's*

Progress, and in particular, to a scene which reflects in fictional terms on the historical reasons for the importance of visual cultures to writers from the Caribbean: In a room reserved for gentlemen at Johnson's Coffee House, amid the stink of eighteenth-century London streets, two sales take place, both advertised in the newspaper and attracting numerous bidders. One is the sale of a young African boy, the other a Renaissance painting. The same gentleman, Lord Montague, purchases both boy and painting, and they ride home together in his coach. Dabydeen portrays this scene as narrated by the African boy many years later when he is an old man, the oldest living African in London. Named, at different times in his life, Mungo, Noah, and Perseus, the old man now reluctantly breaks his silence in return for a few coins from the abolitionist Mr. Pringle who needs the story to "swell the coffers" of the Abolitionist Society.

As the title of the novel indicates, the scene and the entire narrative in which it takes place allude to the series of prints made by Hogarth titled *A Harlot's Progress*. The novel, in fact, spins its many, often conflicting stories from the figure in one of these prints of a small black boy who, in Dabydeen's novel, wears "a feathered turban, an English suit, slippers that might come from China" and a "small Arabian scimitar strapped to his side."[8] He enters the actual engraving at the lower right-hand corner, wearing turban and suit, and carrying a teapot. The tea table, however, has been upset by the harlot, Moll, in her dealings with "the Jew," and in the lower left-hand corner a small monkey, dressed up in a lady's hat anxiously strains away from the upset table and broken china. On the wall above their heads hang two large framed paintings and two smaller portraits.[9] Resonating from Hogarth's print through Dabydeen's imaginatively extended ekphrastic narrative is the intimate eighteenth-century relationship between art and commerce, especially the commerce in human bodies.

Recently, postcolonial critics have turned to the eighteenth century as a period crucial to understanding the cultural legacies of the slave trade. Simon Gikandi, David Lloyd, Ian Baucom, and Sander Gilman have all examined the confluence of a slave trade that reached its height in this century and the development in Britain and Europe of philosophies of the aesthetic. Dabydeen's fiction and his critical writing on Hogarth participate in this project of examining the eighteenth century from a postcolonial perspective. Throughout Mungo's often wildly varying tales, *A Harlot's Progress* portrays, among other things, the contradictions and moral ambiguities facing the English upper class and, in some cases, destroying them. These anxieties often center on the work of art, and in his critical study, *Hogarth's Blacks*, Dabydeen analyzes the representation of black people in both paintings and

1. William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress: Plate II* (1733), etching, 13 5/16 in. × 15 1/16 in., University of California, Berkeley, Art Museum. Purchase made possible through a gift from Phoebe Apperson Hearst. 1998.2.2, photographed for the UC Berkeley Art Museum by Benjamin Blackwell.

prints of the period. Though cast as an autonomous or transcendent realm, art, along with every other kind of commodity, including slaves, was advertised, displayed, auctioned, and sold, leading Lord Montague to wonder in Dabydeen's novel about his motives in purchasing the painting as much as his motives in purchasing the boy. It is not just that the accoutrements of civilization, including works of art, which fill the homes of the aristocracy as well as the newly rich, depend on fortunes made through the slave trade. That is partly the cause of Lord Montague's anxiety; but it is also the leveling of all cultural acts, sacred and profane, to the single plane of commerce that troubles him. This leveling threatens his sense of his status as a subject capable of a *disinterested* aesthetic judgment and, therefore, imbued with the reason common to civilized and free men.

Inhabiting the realm of aesthetics, indeed making it possible, the painting Lord Montague purchases appears sullied, after all, by association with

commerce and especially the commerce in human beings. By extension, the man of taste may feel troubled as to his capacity, and even that of his class, for the distanced, contemplative stance of aesthetic judgment supposedly exercised by men of reason. Doubts regarding this capacity would threaten also his status as a free man, for as eighteenth-century philosophers, such as Kant and Schiller, stressed, men constituted their freedom through disinterested aesthetic judgment.[10] This freedom, exercised in the act of seeing, becomes further troubled by its association with the figure of the not-free black person, as represented within images of art and as commodified in the same space that commercializes art.

In its reading of Hogarth's prints, Dabydeen's novel argues that the leveling of all cultural acts and relationships to that of commerce and the resulting anxieties experienced by men of property become matters of representation, and representation depends on how one sees. As Dabydeen puts it in *Hogarth's Blacks*, "Hogarth sees differently." Hogarth exposes in grotesque detail the whole fabric of daily life *and* what might be supposed transcendent of it as a matter of commercial exchange, permeated with avarice and cruelty. His prints counter the many paintings of the period in which typically adoring black servants appear as indicators of family wealth, power, and benevolence.[11] The countervision of Hogarth's prints provides a critical note to the signboards creaking loudly throughout eighteenth-century London streets on which commodities such as tobacco, bread, and horses were advertised through their visual association with the figure, usually caricatured, of a black person. Dabydeen states that these images were so prevalent that "London in the eighteenth century was *visually* black in this respect" (18).[12]

At the end of *Hogarth's Blacks*, Dabydeen remarks that, in spite of eighteenth-century misreadings of Hogarth's black figures in accordance with racist myths, Hogarth's "compassionate identification with the black is overwhelming" (131). He cites Hogarth's own impoverished background and his anti-colonial sentiments as responsible for this empathy with black slaves and servants and for his ability to "see differently."[13] I would argue, however, for an equally important point: that, through his prints, Hogarth establishes himself as one who *sees* – everything, and in minute detail. As a subject-who-sees, Hogarth clearly marks his difference from the black figures in his prints even while he expresses his compassion for them. He takes his place as a sovereign individual of civil society, who participates fully and actively in the public sphere. His prints are indeed everywhere, discussed, debated, bought, and sold by slaveowners and opponents of slavery alike.

Investigating the philosophical and historical conjunction of slavery and aesthetics in the eighteenth century, Simon Gikandi has argued for the centrality of this conjunction in the constitution of modernity. Gikandi explicates a footnote in David Hume's essay "Of National Characters" in which Hume states that "Negroes . . . and other species of men" are "naturally inferior to the whites."[14] This footnote explains, according to Gikandi, the general principles of taste which Hume espouses in a later essay, "Of the Standard of Taste." In Gikandi's reading, the universality ascribed by Hume to principles of taste already, by virtue of the earlier essay's footnote, excludes "Negroes" and actually reinforces their difference from European men. This difference was constituted through and evidenced by the absence of arts, sciences, and ingenuity in people of "that complexion."[15] Gikandi points out that Hume did not categorize "Negroes" as inhuman, but as inferior due to an "original distinction," a difference that "manifested itself in aesthetic terms – in matters of ingenuity and taste."[16] I would argue, further, that this distinction and Hume's judgment of black people as inferior are crucial to an empiricist philosophy in which sight is privileged as a sensory basis for knowledge of reality.

Gikandi does not comment further on Hume's principles; however, it is clear that they depend on the repeated practice of seeing. For Hume, there exists a universal standard of taste, exemplified in great works of literature and art which remain truly great throughout the ages; however, only a few, rare men are capable of discerning their beauty. By imparting their sound judgments, they make others aware of the universal qualities of genius in, to cite Hume's major example, Homer. These men have "that *delicacy* of imagination," a rare quality, but one which can be practiced and thus developed.[17] Moreover such practice consists, in Hume's exposition, of "frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty," and he describes the development, through practice, from a state of optical confusion to one of clarity in which the eye as an organ is perfected.[18]

Returning to Hume's footnote to examine it and its context in the essay "On National Characters" more closely, it becomes apparent that Hume's empiricist values, privileging the sense of sight, also undergird his arguments concerning national character. He argues against geography, climate, or "air" as physical causes of national character, and contends, instead, that in addition to the effects of what he calls "moral causes" such as forms of government, national character results from the quality of the human mind which "is of a very imitative nature."[19] This imitative nature inclines men toward company with one another and a mutual education in manners and sensibilities which then results in a national character. Hume

dismisses climate or "air" because, as he states emphatically: "It is a maxim in all philosophy, that causes which do not appear are to be considered as not existing."[20] The evidence gained from *seeing* that which *appears* thus determines the reality of existence.

If Hume did not append to his argument the footnote concerning the inferiority of black people, he would have to include them among the many nations and cultures that make up his extensive examples, and they would be deemed capable of change, development, education, and even, by extension, the development of a standard of taste, through the association and company of other men. Instead, he judges them incapable of "forming a civilized nation," and as having "no arts, no sciences."[21] As the remainder of his footnote makes clear, these are not accomplishments that might be developed among "Negroes" on either a collective or an individual basis. Even when it "appears" before our eyes, such development is not to be trusted: "In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly."[22] This man (whom Gikandi identifies as the poet Francis Williams) might have provided Hume with his best example in support of his argument concerning the imitative quality of the human mind. The abilities of an enslaved African to realize this quality of mind to the extent that he becomes a poet in the English language gives rise, however, to another category of imitation, that of a superficial kind as exercised by a parrot. If "naturally inferior," Africans or people of African descent cannot participate in the development of the senses and the practice of viewing objects of beauty that create men of taste and form a national character and civilization. They remain objects of the civilized man's judgment, assessed as incapable of the arts and sciences. They are, thus, assessed inferior due to their inability to see with the practiced and perfected eye that characterizes the man of taste who retains the power to judge them as so lacking.

This judgment extends at times to other people whom Hume deems incapable of aesthetic taste and, again, the second category of imitation emerges: "The coarsest daubing contains a certain luster of colors and exactness of imitation, which are so far beauties, and would affect the mind of a peasant or Indian with the highest admiration."[23] Hume's simile of the parrot in his footnote referring to Francis Williams and his description of the coarseness appreciated by peasants and colonized people as "imitation" present a problem faced by colonial artists of color – the requirement that they enter the realm of art in order to develop as a modern subject-who-sees, and the immediate risk of imitation, that is,

of *being seen* as only parroting, rather than truly creating, within the realm of aesthetics.

The ontological economy of the modern subject in fact requires and develops from this response to the colonized artist. The status of the universalized subject-who-sees depends upon a notion of the development of the senses which casts the "Negro" as incapable of artistic judgment or agency. Such incapacity coincides with a lack of freedom – in the processes of the mind and, frequently, in social and legal status. Following Hume, both Kant and Schiller conceptualized the free man of reason through their philosophies of an aesthetic realm in which freedom was developed and exercised. In the practice of aesthetic judgment, defined as both disinterested and universal, the individual constituted himself as free personally and also socially within an emergent public sphere. Though Kant wrote in opposition to Hume's skepticism,[24] he nevertheless formulated a universal "Subject without properties" (that is, unmarked as different) as one who has developed through an organization of the senses in which seeing predominates.[25] Schiller contested Kant's emphasis on the subject in the aesthetic relation but, nevertheless, reinforced the significance of sight for the development of taste. Describing the entry of "the savage" into the aesthetic realm, Schiller emphasizes the eye and the ear as affording more distance than the "more animal senses" such as touch. However, in elaborating further, he writes only of the eye: "What we actually see with the eye is something different from the sensation we receive; for the mind leaps out across light to objects."[26] It is this leap of the eye across a distance that enables the free play of aesthetic pleasure, free that is of "all claims to reality" or of personal interest. Through the eye, the subject constitutes himself as free: "Once he does begin to enjoy through the eye, and seeing acquires for him a value of its own, he is already aesthetically free and the play-drive has started to develop."[27]

In this parallel development of the senses in a hierarchy dominated by vision and in accord with the development of the human race, Kant and Schiller distinguished those incapable, at least as yet, of this "higher sense" of distanced, contemplative sight. In doing so, they remained under the influence of Hume's footnote concerning the inferiority of "Negroes . . . and other species of men." The other species of men included indigenous peoples of the Americas whom eighteenth-century writers sometimes confused with people from Africa and whom Kant names specifically as occupying the lower stages of development. Though promoting a more developmental model, Kant and Schiller nevertheless reinforced a distinction in ways of seeing that, as I will argue later in this chapter, continued to

shape aesthetic theory into the twentieth century. The subject marked as different is the one Kant describes as exemplified by the Caribs or Iroquois for whom pleasure in color or form amounts to a private charm, rather than an aesthetic value that is universally communicable.[28] It is not a general inferiority, but the absence of freedom, in the imaginative and the cognitive faculties, that then distinguishes the unmodern or pre-modern subject. Such freedom cannot be exercised in simple imitation of existing aesthetic models; it demands an apparent originality in both the judgment and production of art.

When George Lamming states in *The Pleasures of Exile* that "Caliban is never accorded the power to see," he describes precisely the effect on the colonized person of the advent of the modern, universalized Subject as one who sees and whose power to see hinges on the denial of that power to those who bear marks of difference or, as Lamming puts it, are known by "the measure of the condition which [their] physical presence has defined." Lamming's phrasing suggests a point on which David Lloyd has more recently insisted – that the visual structure of racism is not based on an antagonistic recognition of visual difference, but on establishment of a subject-who-sees as the universal human Subject.[29]

Hume's footnote, thus, confirms Hume as the subject-who-sees and judges, a position then sustained by exempting black people from the potential of sensory development. However, it also reveals an anxiety that comes from what Gikandi refers to as being "haunted by that which it excludes which needs to be smuggled in through the footnote or parenthesis."[30] Such hauntings appear also in visual forms – in the art collections of anxious white creoles, images on playing cards, and the commercial signs of commodity culture – as well as in additional footnotes scattered across the pages of eighteenth-century philosophy.

The moral unease felt by Lord Montague on his simultaneous purchase of a black child and a painting intensified even further for men such as William Beckford, the white creole who inherited a fortune made by his grandfather on plantations in Jamaica. Insisting that the categories of the aesthetic and of slavery "operated within the same economy of discourse," Gikandi argues that Beckford, perceived as "not quite white," became an aesthete for two reasons: as the only way to enter English high society and also "as an instrument of reconciling two of the great antinomies of 18th-century culture – commerce and taste."[31] This is the split that also haunts the character of Lord Montague in Dabydeen's novel, giving him a conscience that makes him question the commerce in a Renaissance masterpiece along with that in human bodies. Beckford experienced this split a