


*The
Conjunctural
Art of
Edouard
Duval-Carrié*



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revision of my
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EDOUARD
DUVAL-CARRIÉ

META MOR PHOSIS

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Edited by Anthony Bogues

Repossessing the Old and Creating the New

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ANTHONY BOGUES AND EDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ

Detail of
Of Cotton
Gumboots and
Petticoats



Introduction

Anthony Bogue (AB): Edouard, the first question is about the upcoming show at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). The show is called *Metamorphosis*. It is one in which a lot of the pieces that you are working on, have at their core this transformation of things. It seems in this show that you are experimenting with the idea of change itself? Can you talk to me a little about what you are attempting to do?

Edouard Duval-Carré (ED): I just had, not too long ago, a show at the Perez Museum. I am still after that show very much rooted here in Miami. Location is very important to me when I think about my work. I think, as well, location is critical to MOCA. They are the Museum of Contemporary Art, so you know for them it was not a question of doing a retrospective, or a compendium of my work, but rather they wanted to try and incite me to create brand new work. I myself was also thinking about possible new directions in my work after the Perez. These I think are some of the elements which shape my current thinking!

AB: What are some of the differences between the Perez and MOCA as gallery spaces?

ED: In the first place the MOCA space I am using is a much larger space than the Perez, and they are expecting me to be experimenting with all sorts of things. I understand that. What I wanted to bring out, first of all, is a revision of my work and to try to translate it into a format

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that is probably novel – first of all to me. I don't know if it will be understood by the general public – but at least to me I want to engage with doing a revision of my work, the way I do things and try to push a bit of the boundaries and to create something that is novel, different while still being connected to my past work. I'm not just going to break my train of thoughts and stuff like that, and as you know for the past few years, I've been interested in different things.

So my first consideration for this show was, what can I do? The way I do things – what new could I bring to the table? The second thing is my interests about the Caribbean in general, its history and specifically Haiti. How could I crystallize something that can be presented in a new format? It's a region that is misunderstood – but a lot of people have worked on it. I am not the first and I will not be the last.

So what new could I bring? Or how can I crystallize all of these things into an exhibit that will bring new things to the forefront? So I decided the following. Recently I have been interested in plants and the colonial enterprise. The thing which was at the core of our history – not only in Haiti, but in the region in general, and even part of the sector of the United States – the South and Southeast were plants and commodities. And so I put these together since I've always been interested in plants as commodities. And with these two things I wondered during the colonial period – what was going on in everybody's minds. This is after the initial conquest, it was post-discovery of this New World. Now we were in the 18th and 19th centuries and I am wondering about reactions to this kind of organization and infrastructure. So in all of these ideas, I'm always going back to that because this is the foundation not only of a nation like Haiti, but also of this whole world. So for me I really want to try and understand and then create some discussion around

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Detail of *Ti Noel a Sans Souci*

these issues that might be of interest or just remind myself and others of what really happened, how it happened or perceived to have happened. For me this is of great importance and typically is how I operate.

For this show of course – we are calling it *Metamorphosis*, but you will recall the first time we were talking about was *This Kingdom of Plants*. How did we get from there to where we are now? If you recall we were involved with an exhibition in which we thought about what Africa brought to the table via the slave trade and the implementation of the plantation economy in the region?

Plants are always a part of my work. The visual characteristics of them – I love them. Now I'm realizing that there are also histories about these plants so one of the things we did in that exhibition was to tackle these histories. I wanted to make sure that people understood these histories. So the exhibition was very much a historical one. But everything is interconnected, plant life, life, human life, any life, is totally interconnected. Something like that is not new, but we have to keep on repeating it. The collapsing, you know, of the environment, and all of these things – what's going to happen? So I move from plants to think about the larger question of an ecology. This is not just my preoccupation, but everybody should be preoccupied with what's happening, and how it translates to politics.

When this show came about, we had to create something and I needed to do it in a short time frame. First of all, there is a site specific installation because that is the way I can look at something like that. It's not just ideas – I have to make sure that the space is properly set up and stuff like that. There are all sorts of other parameters that came into play – and I think that I've gotten three or four lines of conduct, lines of progression for this particular

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group of work that I'm creating right now which will coalesce into what you apply called *Metamorphosis*.

History and the Visual Imagination

A.B.: In the work that you're currently doing, you seem to be moving away from the dominance of history and are now engaged with playing with history where it becomes the starting point for your thinking not the end.

ED.: Well, the past or history has always been one of my concerns. To me, you know, first of all the Caribbean, yes they were centers of production, of creating vast wealth, but visually there was nothing ever done systematically, to understand visually what was happening there. I was privileged and fortunate enough to have known this particular gentleman, who was very interested in exactly that and had a collection. His name was Dr. Chateau and one day I remember him saying to me, "Eduard in total there must be 150 images condensing the whole history of the Caribbean." And this goes for the whole archipelago. He said there are some 150 images prior to the Haitian Revolution, that give a sense of what the Caribbean was. Visually that is what we have to build upon or re-visit or try to understand how these visuals were created. One of the first ones I looked at was the compendium of general geography; the fauna and flora of the region which were done early on.

Now when these images were done they were exploring the region from a European point of view and also in a very, very interesting way. If you remember, in the early period of the colonial conquest, the rest of Europe accused Spain of mass-massacring. There were pamphlets being produced in Europe in the 16th century, that depicted the activities of Spain in the Caribbean. Now these outcries –

was it really to support or attract attention to the conditions of the original Indians or indigenous populations? Or just a simple jealousy that Spain was getting some of this wealth and not sharing?

The image that comes to mind immediately, which he gave me access to, it was this pamphlet that was written by Bartolomé de las Casas and was illustrated by the incredible engraver, Theodor de Bry. It was a visual concoction of what the Indians looked like or what they thought they looked like. The artist who did it never went or saw the Caribbean. This is what we think of when we recall that period. In our history, what comes to mind are Theodor de Bry's images of the indigenous people.³

I've always found it interesting that we use these images to teach that particular part of history to Jamaican boys and girls, Haitians and Dominicans. You could go to any history classes in any of these places – they are standard images of the region and they are by somebody who never showed up there.

And the story has continued like that. Some of the images were more factual than others but a lot of them were concocted ideas. So the whole idea of the Caribbean to me, up to a certain point, the dominant visual idea of the region is concocted – if this is so, I say to myself that I have the right from a historical point of view to re-concoct mine.

A.B.: Yes, I understand.

ED.: So from the standard of what I perceive, and trying to extrapolate from what I have around me of what it was before, that's what drives my historical visual work. It's not a game. This is something that a lot of writers, historians, and researchers have been trying to figure out, how this New World was built. Of course there are chronicles. First of all, Columbus, himself wrote about his encounters



Detail of *Capitaine Tomere*

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with this population, he asserts all sorts of things and he does this even though he didn't know the language.⁴

A.B.: So what you are trying to do is to deconstruct the visual imagery of the Caribbean, the visual vocabulary of the Caribbean created by Columbus and others. You are saying as a Caribbean person "I now have arrived to construct a new vision."

ED.: Exactly.

A.B.: A new visual vocabulary of this region.

ED.: Or you know, to extrapolate in a different way because I know the region and its languages. I was born in Haiti and grew up in Puerto Rico, I speak French, Haitian Creole, Spanish and English. I am of the region in a deep way.

A.B.: Yes, that's true.

ED.: So why can't I do this new visual history of the region?

A.B.: Okay.

ED.: In doing this I am trying to point out – probably what is verifiable or what is not verifiable. Also what is part of mythology points of view because everybody has got their point of view.

A.B.: But you are not just the visual historian, although you are that – you are that plus. In other words, if you look at some of the works here, for example, the sugar boats; two outstanding pieces that are going to be in this exhibition. Tell us a bit about these. The boat is very important metaphorically to the Caribbean. The boats brought the enslaved; shipped the commodities to Europe; brought the Europeans who came here and so-called "discovered" the region. Are the boats that you are now making doing something else other than telling us a visual history?

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ED.: Well, to me the boat is the symbol of modernity two centuries ago. Also this whole world became unified because of maritime interactions between nations, people and regions. Also what did this boat bring? Not only people and commodities, and they also brought ideas and they brought conceptions, they brought culture – I mean whole cultures moved on that thing.

When it comes to the European side of it everything has been codified, organized, quantified and stuff like that – but when it came to the masses of African people that showed up here, we tend to know nothing much. Indeed, we only know what was important to the European. You have vast amounts of people that showed up from all sorts of regions. We talk about Africa as one spot but it is a very complex place. This is something that nobody has really realized. Blacks are not homogeneous; they are as different as anybody else. You know somebody from Mauritania and somebody from Angola is as different as the north of Europe and the south of Europe.

This is something that has never been foregrounded. There is a kind of monolithic vision of the place, and I am trying to deconstruct that also.

A.B.: The boats are sugar boats?

ED.: That's the whole story, since sugar was an essential commodity that was part of the region, but also part of the riches that were created in that particular period of time. So to me it has always been, and there is a whole, how would I say, concept that surrounds sugar but it also surrounds social and visual mores, especially in countries like France, England and Spain where the whole idea of "refinement" at that period emerged.

To me that has always been important and there is a book which was crucial to me written by the scholar from Brown.

A.B.: Dian Kriz's



Detail of *Sugar Boat 1*

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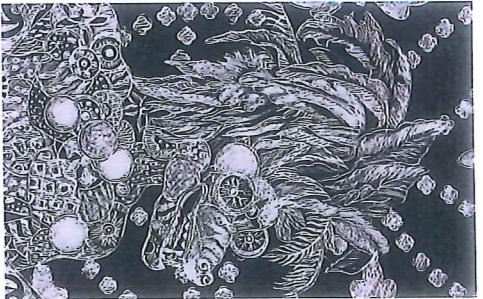
ED: Dian Kriz, book was very informative in the way that she looked at the whole idea of refinement, and the fact that how sugar was at the basis of all of this. France had its golden period: artistically and economically. At that period, it provided riches enough for a King to declare himself *The Sun King*. They should have called him the Sugar King.

A.B.: The Sugar King [laughs] yes.

ED: [laughs] So to me it's been very important to understand this. And so I am looking at it from the production side, where it was being produced, all of its riches and the history of sugar locally in the region. In particular, in Haiti, which was the crown jewel of the French colonial enterprise. Haiti was not the only crown jewel. Each island was a crown jewel for whom ever owned them. Even large places, large tracts of land, like Brazil, and other places like that, were a part of the crown jewels of European powers.

A.B.: The boats that you are doing – they're based – and a sizable part of what you're doing in this show – are based on historical accounts, about sugar, production and boats that move people and move commodities. Yet you are, again, doing something else to the boats...

ED: First of all, they are changing, they're becoming mythical. They're becoming more of a symbol, more of an idea. Remember ideas were brought; cultures were brought with these boats. For which reason – sugar. So they've become almost like a mystical mode of transport. I've converted them into – not only sugar, but they're flying, they have appendages, they are morphing into something new. They're really flying in the air, they probably were under water as well.



Detail of *Las Metamorphoses du Makandal* #4

There is an entire outlook in West Africa as a vision of what in the west is called the Cosmos. The Cosmos in West Africa is mostly underwater, and even that becomes more important because of the slave trade, which was always like this – but they never really conceived of a superstructure of Gods and Goddesses, spirits and stuff like that above the water. All of their spirits are underwater spirits. So to me – I'm trying to play with this. I am trying to convey these kind of ideas that are so ancestral and so primordial in many cultures. How they differentiate themselves from sets of thinking in the Western World, which is always above in the sky – somewhere in the netherworld. So I'm trying to deal with all of those kind of ideas into one object – to condense them into one object. First it's a fondant – it looks edible because it was about sugar. It transports ideas. Then it's like – is it underwater or is it above water? It's for you to decide which ever way you're looking at it...

A.B.: I agree.

ED: So it becomes the symbol of a region. And the perception that from within and from without that we may have of that region.

A.B.: In this show, you're going to have engravings from Alejo Carpentier's novel, *The Kingdom of This World*, but again, you're also doing something else as well.

ED: Yes. Well first of all that particular book, Alejo Carpentier is the father of magical realism. You know the terminology has been much decided recently because it has circumscribed whole regions of visual production or aesthetic production in writing. There is a certain truth to the way that he perceives this confrontation of three

cultures that are so different – one from the other. How do you make sense of it? And from which angle do you look at it? I understand that the European angle looked at these other cultures that they were looking at as inferior or – you know – did not really understand the whole importance of what these people were into.

And the same way the Amerindians or the Africans, people looked at this and it becomes completely fantastical when people don't understand each other – one is thinking of one thing the other looks at it as something else.

So it's a book that I read early on in my life and to me it is the most beautiful story ever written about Haiti condensed in 98 pages – it's fascinating. And it gives you the whole conflagration of three continents or at least two – in a very specific period, which is the forming of the new liberated ex-slave society that might have been doomed from the beginning. So in the novel – first of all there are the horrors of the plantation economy, and the subsequent revolution and what came after – and it stops at one point where Alejo Carpentier decided this is enough. I've had enough of these stories – too much and it ends up with the protagonist being turned into a gander. I've always liked that book and then somebody asked me – why haven't you illustrated it, and I just decided to do it. It brought all sorts of things. The way I wanted to do it using very modern materials – like Plexiglass and having to have it etched in that particular fashion. I tried to do the engraving side of it – I'm trying to concoct something different.

A.B.: Are you illustrating the book in the way in which – say over 300 years ago Theodor de Bry illustrated Las Casas's book?



Detail of *Las Metamorphoses du Makandal* #3

ED: Yes – and why not? We have to recreate, I mean time will tell whether my visions, or my concepts of that novel are translated. One thing I know is that the visual, I mean the written visuals by the novelist are so extraordinary that being from Haiti, I can see how he could extrapolate from what he was seeing in the 1940s to the 17th century. The same things are still around and I can extrapolate and see them. His visuals, his written visuals are just as extraordinary. It was an easy exercise, because I knew about it. I know the story. I can see what was to him fantastic about it – and when you read his novel you cannot believe it, it's a completely factual novel. There is nothing totally outrageous or fantastical about it – he's just telling you a story. It's the visuals that he used.

A.B.: And the point of view of the person telling the story, Ti Noel...

ED: Ti Noel is looking at the world from a certain perspective. He was probably born on the island the son of slaves, and his life was very limited. This is what the author was looking at, and he also manages to infuse himself into the mind of this very circumscribed individual – looking at maybe a fifty-year story of a very important period in Haitian history.

Extrapolation and History

A.B.: You've used the word extrapolate a lot in this conversation and I wanted to talk about the process of extrapolation as you see it.

ED: Extrapolation, to me is like this. Everything has a face value. You look at something and it is there in front of you. The key is how you integrate it. When you go to history, I think most historians extrapolate. Take the Greek Herodotus the so-called father of Western history, I think his work is a kind of geography lesson but one which goes beyond the boundaries of geography. He has a vision of the world where one does not know what's next door. The same thing with the proliferation of sci-fi in the world today, where everybody's extrapolating what's out there – nobody knows about it. So, it's incredible how much latitude you can take! So people extrapolate quite a lot.

A.B.: I see. Is that what you think you're doing?

ED: That is the way I understand it because there is no other way to understand it.

A.B.: Is your work, as I listen to you speaking – you use the word fantastic. Can one say your extrapolation is really *fantastic realism*?

ED: The fantasy is how you look at a thing. That's where the fantasy lies. For example, this question of

microbes and germs, and diatoms and plants and all of these things and how we are completely part of it and they live with us. They live in us. Things apparently go haywire and you get really sick, but normally these things either provide you with good things or destroy you. One way or the other. Until the microscope there was no way to understand it, so now how do I present that?

I can go to a scientific book. When you look at the early twentieth-century vision of the bacterial or microscopic world – it was like art more than reality. They saw something through a twisted lens and they thought that was what it was. They then transposed it, by drawing or painting it. When photography came it was in black and white. So they had to color it, and how did they color it? So all of these things interest me as process. Now there are very advanced instruments that can be used to really capture these things, but one always wonders is it really what that is? Because it has mutated so many times, the visual concept of the microscopic world at the beginning was just drawings of somebody, so of course it was interpretation.

Detail of *Soucouyant* (2 of 4)



Microbes

A.B.: So what are your four pieces in which you work through this issue?

ED: I'm capturing 19th-century descriptions of diatoms and germs that exists in scientific books of that period. I've just really downloaded them and copied them and pasted them just to show these things live within us. We are a part of it, and also this whole concept of trying to understand something that you cannot really see which puts us immediately to the fact that our vision is very limited, so we compensate what is out there with a lot of fantasy. How you conceive of it, how you think about it. It always amuses

me that these things were taken as the law of science. the law of the lord; whatever you want to call it. Suddenly, you know without cause and no problems – an advancing technology happens – everything is discarded and they're not even really trying to discuss that there was a misconception, that there was a misunderstanding. So life continues and we just go along with the flow. Fantasy is always a part of it.

A.B.: Some other pieces that are in the show seem to me that they are composed with figures and signs now common in your work, particularly Vodou spirits and symbols.

ED: Well, this is going to be very interesting. It's part of that refinement thing.

A.B.: Okay.

ED: You know, in the 21st century, there is a question of how can you really transform the mundane and what's discardable. One thing that is most discardable are kids' toys. First of all, they are invented by somebody and then they go out of fashion and you find them in garbage dumps. All of these things have some kind of intent to them and a kind of quality to them that is almost fantastical because kids love these kind of things. The production of these things is so intense that you find them across time, you find them now, and tomorrow there will be a whole series of new ones. They are discarded, and they are all to me very precious. Sometimes they are very delicate or very ornate. They can be reinterpreted, repossessed, and reused you know, and that is what I try to do. They then become transposed in another situation in an interaction between kids and their toys. They can become symbols of preciosity, symbols of political strife. They can become reminders of paradigms, and cultural things.

By just putting them and re-arranging, and composing these discards in certain ways you can recreate a whole vision or whole aesthetic of probably – what is really precious. There is a preciousness about these kinds of things and they become jewels.

The whole idea that they are encased in resin you can read it whichever way you want to but the one thing that these discards in contemporary culture are repossessed

and put in a very precious manner you know, encased in resin so that it's like – to me I've always loved the idea that the oldest things – living things in the earth were encased by amber – by resin. That's how we know how old things are like that. So you know all of these things to me are very interesting to play with them and these ideas.

A.B.: But you have some things drawn from the colonial archive. And then you have Vodou Loas.

ED: Yes. I wanted to take ideas and present them in a sequence as they are going to be in that show. Where images are really reinforced by putting them in this format. I have no qualms about reusing or repossessing as I said, downloading images from the internet that are bits and pieces of information or visuals that I found interesting.

I've been fascinated by, for example, Agostino Brunias. This artist that was brought to the Caribbean to almost do a propaganda – a campaign, a promotional campaign of what these islands were to attract new colonists. His

Detail of *Memory Window 2*



descriptions of colonial, it's so clear that it has been used by every island as their own story, when he was specifically speaking just of Dominica. This artist created a visual of what was going on there at the time to represent what was going on all over the Caribbean.

It's in every history book from Jamaica, Cuba, everybody uses it.

AB: And the Vodou figures and images?

ED: I've been creating for the last thirty years of my career my own versions of how I understand Vodou. This is one of the loosest and most least canonized religions. First of all, it's a concoction of more than two hundred ethnic groups, vision of the Cosmos. What has been condensed in Haiti as Vodou, the name has another completely different meaning. Practiced in West Africa, in Haiti becomes very colonial – a very New World thing that exist not only in Haiti but all over the Caribbean, and even parts of the Southern states, wherever Blacks congregated or were brought to. It's this concoction of different religious mixtures that I loosely call Vodou – it's called by different names all over the region and there are different spirits but it's all African based visions of the world or the Other World. So there are a lot of similarities you know, from Haiti, to Brazil, to the Southern United States. You know the Kongo ethnic group was very important, in these kinds of creations and their concepts of the world were very peculiar.⁸

AB: Yes.

ED: So influential was Kongo culture that you can do this whole fringe Kongoland, it's quite fascinating, when you realize the fact that all of these people believed in a certain group of things or they had a certain concept of the Other World, or of life, of whatever you want to call it. Their philosophical construct of the world permeated and they crossed over and when you look at it they came from a very specific group of people in Africa. So, it is not simply an African thing – when you look at what the Kongo brought to the New World.

AB: Yes. And many scholars are now working on what each African group brought. But to return to the show –

are there certain lines of artistic thinking that are there from your earlier work?

ED: Yes, everything is included!

AB: It's all imagined in new forms –

ED: Right.

AB: So this is a show of experimentation?

ED: Exactly. To me first of all, that was the premise of this particular show. That I ought to bring something new to the table. I'm just not going to re-invent the wheel as they say. There are things that have been said by me – or been painted by me and so on – that I find could be re-interpreted twenty years later. Was I clear on what I was saying then? Is this clearer now? Also, I'm taking things that I've done on canvas – painted and thinking of refurbishing and putting them through the prism of the internet – morphing them – playing with them – changing the colors. Doing all sorts of things to it – with that new medium that I have at my disposal. And recreating something – of course, to remember – I mean I remember when I did these things. It's completely new, at least to me.

AB: So you are engaged in the process of metamorphosis?

ED: Exactly, so I think we've got the right term.

AB: [Laughs] Okay.

ED: For this exhibit, even though the previous works are re-assessed, re-possessed, refurbished or reconstructed to be presented in new formats, they are re-arranged so you can see the connections between different works even though it might not be coherent from a linear story line.

AB: Yes.

ED: So it's things I have re-assembled.

AB: One of the things about the show though, which was very personal, are your books and objects of where you work.

ED: Right.

AB: Why are we doing this?

ED: It's very interesting because I've always been interested in manifestations of cultures from anywhere,

and to me I'm almost like an anthropologist you know, in that sense. I like books about other cultures, books about history. I collect books about all sorts of things, plus objects also.

To me an image or an object can give you as much history as a ten volume set on one particular story. Once you get into it – you have to look at it, you have to deconstruct it, you have to really understand what was being done – with the object that you are looking at. I've collected a few things, I don't have the most extensive collection – I wish I had you know – the British Museum at my disposal. ...

AB: [Laughs]

ED: That's one of the greater Museums in the world. Collecting has been a part of my life since I was a kid. I used to collect shells and some of them are still around me. It's an amalgamation of things that sometimes I look at them. The books also are very important to me visually. I think an artist today has to have a very important sense of not only the history of art, not just Western art, but every art that has been produced. Why it has been produced and the context in which it was done.

I'm already marked by the fact that I come from a place that has such a strong supposedly authentic – the transposition of Africa to the New World, in a place like Haiti has all these connotations. Yes, I'm interested in that but also there are other stories to me. So in my collections I am trying to learn. There is still a lot to learn.

AB: So if you want to know about Edouard Duval-Carrié we should therefore not just look at his art but we should look at what he reads.

ED: Exactly. Reads, looks at and collects.

AB: Thank you very much.

ED: Okay. Thank you.

¹The exhibition at the Perez was titled *From Revolution in the Tropics to Imagined Landscapes: The Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié*. It was done in 2014. See exhibition catalog, Anthony Bogues (ed) *From Revolution in the Tropics to Imagined Landscape* (2014).

²The exhibition being referenced here is *Liquid Knowledge* (2015). It was curated by Geri Augusto & Anthony Bogues for the Art Basel, Global Caribbean Exhibition, 2015. The exhibition was displayed at the Haitian Cultural Center in Miami.

³Theodor de Bry was an engraver and editor who worked in the 16th century. He illustrated the European expeditions into the Americas. Although he never went to the New World his illustrations were taken from the writings and conversations with the Europeans who were involved in the European colonial project.

⁴The book on the first voyage has been republished, James Wadsworth (ed), *Columbus and his First Voyage: A History in Documents* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

⁵Dian Kriz is the author of the seminal text, *Slavery, Sugar and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies* (2008).

⁶See for example Lam's drawing on the cover of Cesaire's 1939 original version of *Notebook of Return to the Native Land* (ed) A. James Arnold & Clayton Esleman (2013). For an extensive discussion on the relationship between Cesaire and Lam see, Daniel Maximin, *Cesaire & Lam: Insouliers batisseurs* (2011).

⁷Agostino Brunias was a 18th-century painter whose paintings have become iconic of the colonial portraiture in Caribbean art. One of his most important paintings is titled, "Dancing Scene in the West Indies."

⁸For a discussion of the Kongo influence in African Caribbean and New World art forms see Robin Foyton, Carlee Forbes, Hein Vanhee (eds) *Kongo Across the Waters*, (2013).