



Special Issue 16

Gender Articulated: Visual Language and the Un/Seeable Self

Guest Editor

Marsha Pearce

Visual Culture Scholar, Independent Curator, and Educator

Keywords: Ways of seeing, visual politics, Caribbean visuality, visual cultures of gender, visual art

How to cite

Pearce, Marsha. Gender Articulated: Visual Language and the Un/Seeable Self. *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Issue 16: 1–10.

In her 1945 essay "The Great Camouflage," Suzanne Césaire foregrounds the Caribbean as a historical space of visual politics, characterised by masking and revealing, acts of seeing and overlooking, and the tensions of outer appearances versus insights. She writes about a great game in which exotic tropicality can conceal the nuances of our identities:

...if the flowers have known how to find just the right colors to leave one dumbstruck, if the tree-like ferns have secreted golden saps for their white crooks, rolled-up like a sex organ, if my Antilles are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded, it is then because, on that day, the weather is most certainly too blindingly bright and beautiful to see clearly therein (2009, 45-46).

If the weather is indeed too "blindingly bright and beautiful" we can miss the complexity and realities of Caribbean people performing their daily lives. We may not see women in multidimensional and expansive terms, "the hummingbird-women...the women of four races and dozens of bloodlines" (Césaire 2009, 40), or the practice of what Ronald Cummings calls a "queer marronage," that is, strategies of visibility and invisibility which "characterize the experience of gays and lesbians and other sexual minorities in their engagement with...Caribbean heteropatriarchy" (2012, 13). We may not discern both the presence and obscurity of female masculinities (Cummings 2012/2013), and the gaze that comes with machismo might also go undetectable. To be an upper-class white man, a macho, is a construct founded on sight. The "macho understands who he is when he tells himself who he is not," says Miguel De La Torre in his look at Cuban identity dynamics, "Machos as subjects are defined by contrast with the seen objects: Amerindians, Africans, Asians, women, and the poor" (1999, 224). How we see, therefore, informs notions of Self and Other. Put differently, scopic regimes frame and govern the ways in which we live, move and have our being in the world. This special issue of *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* focuses on visual modes as a critical means by which gender is lived, negotiated, organised, and resisted. It is particularly invested in constructions of everyday ways of seeing and unseeing. Attention to visual culture is not only about what is made visible

to us. It also entails “the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked” (Mitchell 2002, 170). The issue, therefore, asks: What is out of sight, and hiding in plain sight in our constructions and deconstructions of gender, sex, and sexualities in the Caribbean? What is seen? What can’t be seen? What is unseen in our personal experiences and individual, interior histories? What is un/seeable in our beliefs about ourselves as woman, man, non-binary and transgender folx?

The title of this issue is borrowed from the book *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (Hall and Bucholtz 1995), a project of sociolinguistics that explores connections between language and feminist theory. Expanding the analytical frame and the intersections of language and gender, this issue emphasises visual language as key to world-making, to configuring realities in which gender, sex, and sexualities are enacted. It centres Caribbean contexts in those realities. *Gender Articulated: Visual Language and the Un/Seeable Self* reflects on Caribbean visuality (historical and cultural formulations of vision) and Caribbean visual arts (creative expression), where the word “articulated” signals art communicated in its broad sense, and the linkages between gender and visual artistic practices; those linkages formed under certain conditions: social, cultural, political—connections that are “not...absolute and essential for all time” (Hall 1986, 53).

The choice of Bahamian photographer Melissa Alcena's *Mango III* for the cover image of this issue sets a powerful tone. The photograph establishes a countervisuality; a challenging of what is constructed as seeable in the Caribbean. She presents a young girl standing under a banana leaf. There, in the shade of that broad frond, the weather is less blindingly bright. Sight is possible, but it is, at the same time, thwarted. Alcena portrays her subject from behind. In the absence of the girl's face, the act of looking is frustrated. She is less accessible. Less knowable. Going beyond *looking* at the girl, we are prompted to *look with her*. Drawn into her perspective we might consider: What is holding her gaze? What is she thinking? Feeling? We are called to wonder about her inner landscape, in contrast to the clichés of a tropical topography. She does not consent to an observer's easy reading. The girl in Alcena's

photographic portrait is not invisible. She is, instead, deliberately unseeable. Here, unseeing is a refusal.

The “Visuals” section of the issue is a curated suite of artworks by twelve artists – it functions as a digital gallery. Works range in media from chromogenic photograms to watercolours on paper, acrylic on wood, glitter and rhinestones on canvas, and bold assemblages of nylon rope, floor resin, coconut powder and black beans to create provocative sculptural forms. The artworks are organised into three thematic areas to offer focal points for contemplation. If each artist's work is seen as a ray of light, then each theme is a point of convergence, where these rays meet. The first theme, “Piecing Together the Un/Seen: Collage as a Language of Being,” underscores the creative technique of aggregating diverse fragments to make a new whole. Kashif Dennis explores world-building, juxtaposing beauty with violence to engage issues of spectacle and erasure in the lived experiences of gender-expansive people. Farrah Karapetian's work is a re-membering of the life of Paulette Nardal, a Martinican writer, feminist, and a driving force in the Négritude intellectual movement. In the absence of historical details, Karapetian produces images that embrace loss while attending to recovery. M. Florine Démosthène addresses our ontological multiplicity. Through her repetition of figures she gives us a manifold presence – images of human beings as earthly and cosmic, knowable and unknowable. Mazaré Trim reflects on his fluid identity in relation to Christian ideals and heteronormative constructs. He processes the tensions of shame and euphoria in the swirl, blot and stain of pigment and ink on paper.

The second theme, “Veiled sight: Un/Masking Identities and Experiences,” highlights tactics of uncovering and screening. Marlon James' photographic series directs his lens at masculine vulnerability and intimacy. The sea in these images does the transformative work of unmasking, not to emasculate, but to cleanse societal dictates and shore up shifts in how we understand Caribbean masculinity. Ray Arcadio references comic-book superheroes and African masking traditions to consider the condition of the hidden psyche. The women in his life – his mother, wife, and daughter – are inspiration for his *Messenger*

series. Shari Phoenix's *Pin Up Rebels* defy consumable representations of women. Through an aesthetics of staging and costuming her images resist mainstream standards of beauty. She refers to work by Gillette Alexander Elvgren, an American painter of pin-up models, and subverts the expectations of his genre. For this journal's special issue, she gives us new paintings with tropical settings. Sasha-Kay Nicole Hinds courageously confronts gender-based violence through experimental photography. She seeks to unmask the horrors of abuse that too often remain in the shadows of Caribbean societies.

For the third theme, "Beyond Glimpses in the Archive: Visual Narratives of the Land and Body," the artists look at the intersection of humans, the natural world, and historical records. Tessa Alexander reimagines women depicted in old postcards sourced online and in physical library collections. Her painted portraits include images of plants as symbolic of resistance and sustenance. Cydne Jasmin Coleby excavates photographic archives to incorporate fruits and flora as anatomical parts in her images of women, to reflect on desirability and agency. Renluka Maharaj draws on her family's history as indentured labourers and the images by French photographer Felix Morin, who was based in Trinidad in the nineteenth century. She reclaims his "Coolie Belles," through her own assertion of their lives in her painted works. We see a progression in her portrayal of these women from an overt presence on canvas to letting these women recede into the natural environment, to a point of almost disappearing. Maharaj calls this a deliberate removal of viewer access and a return or "going back to what was before the invaders declared them to be savage...to begin again in the footsteps of these women's ancestors." Coralina Rodriguez Meyer draws on Indigenous knowledge in the Americas to attend to ideas of liberation, creation and destruction – to what survives and what is lost. Muisca and Orisha deities inform sculptures that point to a history of violence meted out on human bodies and the land. She creates fertility or procreative effigies which feature the female form using dead coral, palm husks and other materials. Work by Rodriguez Meyer, Maharaj, Coleby and Alexander exceed the partial views offered by the archives.

The peer-reviewed articles, which follow the art gallery, hold practices of looking at their core. Chinyere Brown's "Site Seen: Visual Art, Sovereignty, and Blackness in the Anglophone Caribbean" uses witnessing and strolling in the ruins as approaches to visual analysis in her confrontation of colonial structures that obstruct visions of Blackness. She weaves notions of "care" and "clumsiness" in her handling of the definitions and frameworks that shape how we live and relate to each other. This methodology creates a compelling intimacy, bringing Brown and her readers into a collaborative, sensory space of feeling together. Of note is her consideration of "how feminist analysis can guide our reading of the visual and how the visual, in turn, can give us more expansive ways of understanding, imagining and expressing feminist, decolonial thought."

Gabby Mahabeer's "'What's a Girl to do when She's Needy?' At the Intersections of Queer Dancehall, Social Media, and Queer Caribbean Visuality," is a rereading of Jamaican dancehall as a queer Caribbean visuality of refusal. Mahabeer combines Queeribbean feminisms (Queer Caribbean Studies and Caribbean feminisms) with virtual ethnography and personal experiences to advance dancehall as a practice of care and repair. Through writing that takes us from one "scene" to another, connecting ideas with "vignettes," Mahabeer does her own image-making while analysing the social media platforms YouTube and TikTok. She, too, creates a communal space for her readers by sharing a co-created Spotify playlist of queer/womanist dancehall music.

Elyse Veloria's "The Choreography of Celia Cruz *en Camera*: Aesthetics of Gender and Performance through the Lens of Black Visual Studies," deploys a practice of listening to the archival images of Cuban singer Celia Cruz. She gives her ear to these works within a Black feminist conceptual frame, listening as a way of seeing Cruz beyond conventions of beauty – beyond what is visible. Rather than spectacle, Veloria foregrounds Celia Cruz's "performances of interiority." Shelby Sinclair's "From Complete Despair: Gender and Crisis in the International Photographic Archive of Haiti" argues that a definition of crisis as spectacular and episodic obscures how ordinary, diurnal devastation in Haiti is

seen and understood. Sinclair pinpoints controlling features of Haiti's photographic record, including disaster sensationalism. She then offers a creative intervention with a close reading of photographic works by Haitian-American artist Widline Cadet – images that affirm life and Black interiority.

Amanda McIntyre's "Carnival Madonna: The Contemporary Caribbean Baby Doll Masquerade," reimagines the mother and child archetype in contemporary Caribbean carnival. She presents the social history of this masquerade, which emerged as parodies of a single mother mainly performed by men. Against this backdrop, McIntyre unpacks her own creative construction and performance of the Baby Doll character, highlighting her photographic series *Siparee Mas*, created in collaboration with other local artists. She draws on Catholic and Hindu references and positions them alongside her memories to discuss the evolution of this street theatre in relation to the presence and absence of the child – a mother without her baby. Time is also a feature of her analysis. She explores this masquerade through the lens of Caribbean retro-futurism, travelling to the past to meet the women depicted in this historical performance and "leap[ing] forward on the timeline, so that in the 21st century they craft their own paths toward beauty, love and perhaps even divinity."

The closing section of this issue, "Gender Dialogues," sheds an academic tone but retains an incisiveness through a mix of interviews, creative writing, poetry, and reflective essays. In a sense, it adds another vantage point for seeing the thoughts and experiences articulated in the journal. Andre Bagoo shares two provocative poems: "The Archbishop's Drag" and "The Equal Opportunity Act." In one piece, word is presented as image through a play with typographic arrangement, and in the other, we get a hybrid format of text and visuals. Tracy Assing's "In/Visible Native" is a powerful work of memory and self-declaration; a self understood through a First Peoples' perspective that sees no division between human and more-than-human worlds. Assing addresses erasure and our existential blind spots.

In “The In/Visible Woman: Gender, Memory, and Monuments in the Caribbean,” Allison Ramsay reflects on the underrepresentation of women in public monuments, and Shauneé Richards considers how two artists render female subjects as agents of their sexuality in “Carnival is Woman: The Female Gaze in Trinidad Carnival.” Bianca Moña’s conversation with artists Llanor Alleyne and Dominique Hunter, titled “What’s Found in the Foliage?” reveals an un/seen self constructed between the universality and specificity of place – entangled in flowers, leaves and trees. The natural environment is also centred in Carine Schermann’s “Mafalda Mondestin’s Secret Tropical Garden: Looking at the Island from the Dominican Republic.” Mondestin, an artist, talks about painting women in nature as a kind of self-preservation; a means of unburdening women and resisting the “trope in Haiti where the women are ‘poto mitan’ (the central pillar in Voudou ceremonies).” She invites a shift in how these women are perceived.

Rosanna Valencia’s short story and accompanying digital paintings, “Home is a Feeling,” shed light on Caribbean diasporic experience, familial gender dynamics, and those aspects of our lives that move in and out of view as we oscillate between public and private spaces. Valencia’s work leaves the reader with a close-up view, as if a camera has zoomed in so that we might see Caribbean gendered realities with all of their textures, variegated hues, and tonal qualities.

Gender Articulated: Visual Language and the Un/Seeable Self illuminates gender in the Caribbean not only as a constructed phenomenon but as that which appears and disappears, coming in and out of view in a tropical game of hide-and-seek. Gender is sensory; it is historically, socially and culturally (un)sighted. If “the visual is part of the sense experience of the Region which remains insufficiently translated or documented” (Mohammed 2009, 370), then this journal issue contributes to the effort of interpreting and recording our visual culture, with an awareness that our gendered selves are imag(in)ed too.

References

- Césaire, Suzanne. 2009. "The Great Camouflage." In *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941-1945) Suzanne Césaire*, edited by Daniel Maximin. Translated by Keith Walker. Wesleyan University Press.
- Cummings, Ronald. 2012. "Queer Marronage and Caribbean Writing." PhD diss., University of Leeds.
- Cummings, Ronald. 2012/2013. "Jamaican Female Masculinities: Nanny of the Maroons and the Genealogy of the Man-Royal." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 21 (1/2): 129-154.
- De La Torre, Miguel A. 1999. "Beyond Machismo: A Cuban Case Study." *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 19: 213-233.
- Hall, Stuart. 1986. "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall." Interview by Lawrence Grossberg. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (2): 45-60.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. 2002. "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture." *Journal of Visual Culture* 1 (2): 165-181.
- Mohammed, Patricia. 2009. *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation*. MacMillan.