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***Imaging the Caribbean:
Culture and Visual Translation***

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Book Review

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Behind Patricia Mohammed's *Imaging the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation* is more than a decade of research conducted in numerous places, but chiefly, the Caribbean. The scope of this research can be gleaned from the acknowledgements, which cite two UWI Principals, historian Professor Bridget Brereton, Gender Studies colleagues on all 3 campuses, as well as supportive individuals in Jamaica, Trinidad, Haiti, Cayman, St Lucia, the Bahamas, Suriname and Barbados. Archival research was done in Spain, England and Northern Ireland, Holland and North America, but the provenance of the work remains overwhelmingly the Caribbean. This is important in the face of a history of representation largely produced by outsiders—from explorers to colonial administrators to travellers and visiting artists, who viewed the region through the lens of European art forms and conventions.

This representational history, Mohammed suggests, goes back 500 years to the early maps and to engravings of Columbus's landing and first contact with the New World. The sheer breadth of the enterprise of her book distinguishes it from, for example, Krista Thompson's *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (2006), with its much more specifically defined focus. Thompson's interest

is primarily in early twentieth century tourist photographs, which she uses to “illustrate the historical roots and long term effects of touristic representations on the islands and inhabitants, implications of tourism on ways of seeing the Anglophone Caribbean and lived experience of space for local residents” (3-4). The advantage of a narrower lens and a more restricted field of reference becomes apparent when compared with the breathtaking eclecticism of Mohammed’s approach—which is both its strength and its weakness. Disregard for conventional boundaries results in startling and revealing juxtapositions, and frees the work from the stifling effect of ‘official’ categories. It is perhaps inevitable that this heady freedom at times shades into superficiality in the treatment of complex theoretical ideas and a tendency to generalisation. The author reflexively indicates her awareness of this when she says in her conclusion: ‘It is expected in writing such a book within the academy that some unifying metaphor or clever theoretical argument will provide...a handle on this body of work’. (370) Ultimately, then, the book works best if viewed as a provocative and refreshing introductory survey, rather than a closely argued academic study. The larger significance of the work lies in its focus and its methodology. The idea of a *visual language* which can be read and decoded is not in itself new. It goes back to Saussure and the distinction he made between sign and signifier, or between an object and the ability to categorise it in language. What this means is that there is no such thing as unmediated vision: Everything we see, we see through a mesh of associations, and the act of looking is, therefore, always an act of interpretation.

But the book does more than simply adopt a now-familiar cultural studies methodology which treats all cultural forms as texts to be decoded. In taking the *visual* as the primary medium for reading Caribbean culture, it contests not only the primacy of writing as a way of organising knowledge, but also the conventional wisdom that the primary mode of Caribbean expression is orality. ‘I privileged visual culture,’ says the author, ‘because I believe that human sense perception has survived over long periods because of visual production’, from cave paintings onwards. ‘Imaging,’ she says, is therefore ‘the act of drawing together many images which summon up the space, past and present, and configuring a future... If there is a purpose to this book it is to suggest that the visual is part of the sense experience of the Region which remains insufficiently translated or documented’ (370).

This work of translation and documentation demands what Mohammed calls ‘disciplinary promiscuity’. Interestingly, to begin with, the idea ‘emerged from a search for gendered categories in history’ (8)—namely, from Gender Studies. Yet, using a method she calls ‘archaeological delving’, she also draws on history, cartography, heraldry, art history and visual cultures including painting, photography and film. In the process, the author hopes to find ‘new categories of analysis...other than the tired old ones of class, race and gender’ (16). In fact, we soon discover, her project is much more ambitious. It is to reconfigure everything we thought we knew about our environment and the last 500 years of history, in the light of new ways of looking at the visual traces of the past and the way they inform and influence the present.

The book is not, according to Mohammed, ‘a treatise on art, nor a book of art criticism, nor a history of art in the Caribbean...it’s more a history of ideas or of knowledge as it has been created about the Region’ (9). Her aim is nothing less than the ‘writing of history through cultural production’ (45), with the purpose of reimagining the Caribbean space. In an epilogue, she describes her process as akin to painting with tempera, ‘an ancient and still used medium in painting’ which involves the overlaying of paint to create different effects of translucence or opacity. ‘The artists and architects of colonisation attempted to achieve opacity by overlays of the same tone in order to obliterate cultures...they were afraid of extinction and were successful in subjugation for harnessing wealth and power. But they were not successful in eradicating these (cultures) as the colours have seeped through to allow other readings’ (373).

This is a good description of the multi-layered narrative and the juxtaposition of images we encounter in the book: an 18th century painting next to a snapshot of girls in a hammock in Port-of-Spain, or a sequence of portraits of men—from a half-naked Carib through to the leaders of the Haitian Revolution to the late Bob Marley. This eclecticism is the strength of the book and its originality. The disregard for conventional boundaries results in startling and revealing new significations: to quote the author, ‘a kaleidoscope of juxtapositions’, or to quote Antonio Benitez Rojo, a ‘soup of signs’, his term for describing the Caribbean.

Another example is the use of personal testimony alongside theoretical formulations. The starting point for the book, or the opening frame as you might say, is the author as a young girl growing up in a village in the south of Trinidad, where her first experience of art was the paintings by her father and uncle on the walls of her family home. At primary school, she encountered other images in the Nelson Readers, and reproductions of famous paintings like Constable’s ‘Haywain’. I mention this because I grew up with a reproduction of the same painting, not in the Caribbean, but several thousand miles away in Tanzania. This shared visual reference point is an example of the reach of colonial culture and the way it reproduced itself in different parts of the world; it suggests linkages between Mohammed’s project and, for example, Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor’s work, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (2000).

Despite the kaleidoscopic approach, the book is carefully and methodically structured; the 10 chapters, each with a specific focus, map the visual constructions of the Region. *Imaging the Caribbean* begins by deconstructing a cultural hierarchy based on Western systems of knowledge which privilege writing over other sign systems. The third chapter looks at early maps—icons of territorial discovery and possession—as the first ‘scripting of the Caribbean’; the fourth considers traces of the pre-Columbian past as symbols of Caribbean antiquity and the relation of these to alternative spiritual practices and folk beliefs. The next three chapters look at crucial aspects of Caribbean cultural identity.

Chapter 5 deals with ‘The European Gaze’, which discusses the collection and categorisation of plants and people as part of the colonial project of scientific exploration, and concepts of beauty related to race. Chapter 6 considers ‘The African Presence’,

which addresses the inscription of a hierarchy of white over black and the denigration of aspects of black culture and spiritual practice, taking Haiti as the main example: ‘Because people were used to looking at art on certain places, on the walls of houses, or churches, or sculptured three-dimensional pieces, even on the body as in tattoos or scarification, they did not conceive of art as that on dirt floors and walls of huts, made of substances like flour and ashes on the floor’ (246). (An example is the vèves, designs that embody the loa, which Mohammed calls ‘the inscriptions of the religion of voodoo’ [236].) Chapter 7 then reflects on ‘The Asian Signature’, where the author considers problems of “outsiderness”, and the multiple influences of Hindu, Islamic and Chinese art in the region. The final two chapters focus on ‘The Caribbean Picturesque’, from travel narratives to contemporary tourism; as well as symbols of Empire and Nationhood. Here the author convincingly shows how the flags, crests and coats of arms of the new nations emerged as a way of inventing new national icons, around which a reinvented identity could coalesce.

Pat Mohammed acknowledges many other thinkers—C.L.R. James, Derek Walcott, Stuart Hall, Benitez Rojo, Wilson Harris—though I would like to end with a question she takes from Sylvia Wynter, from which the entire book in a sense opens out: ‘Can there emerge a new and ecumenically human view that places the events of 1492 within a new frame of meaning, not only of natural history but also of a newly conceived cultural history, specific to and unique to our species?’ (36) Mohammed sees the book as following Wynter’s exploration of ‘a newly conceived cultural history’ by way of her own concept of ‘visual translation’. This paradigm offers, for Mohammed, a path to Wynter’s ‘conceptual move into a “realm beyond reason” ... which brings together a system of symbolic representation with subjective understandings’ (37). *Imaging the Caribbean* (see picture below) is a provocative and joyful exploration of this synthetic and syncretic way of seeing.



As territories under the Caribbean, a chain of small islands and adjacent continents defined by their geography and national resources, is one of histories – beaches, rhyms, reggae, andness and musical black men. This ground-breaking study of the Region's iconography explores how a Caribbean sensibility has been shaped. It visits the Caribbean while focusing on Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados, tracing the indelible parameters drawn on each society by the colonial encounter, creating the boundaries of disciplines and the methodological and material of history, literature, art, politics and cultural studies. Including hundreds of images, from illustrative drawings and sketches, European paintings, photographs and sculptures, to *Black blood* and Haitian coin, *Imaging the Caribbean* is a study of visual representation of the Caribbean as perceived by outside and inside alike over the last five hundred years.



As contemporary globalisation pervasively involves a commercialisation of culture and packaging of national identity, the author asks: what is real and what is mythical, and how do we value the familiar? This journey through the visual archives of the Region, suggests the way ideas have evolved over different historical periods. The book reveals a perspective of the Caribbean as an only contested territory on which regimes were built, but where cultures were reborn in the New World, where adaptability and willingness to accept the Other has created an unending mosaic in which all peoples are suffered. Indeed, it asks how we might continue to shape the imaginations of the Caribbean and of culture itself.

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Imaging The Caribbean Patricia Mohammed

