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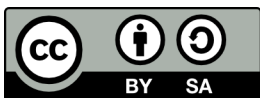
### Book Section

#### How to cite:

Wainwright, Leon (2018). Materialities and Mobilities: A Note on the Political Geography of Contemporary Caribbean Art. In: Ueckmann, Natascha; Brüske, Anne and Bandau, Anja eds. Reshaping (g)local dynamics of the Caribbean: Relaciones y Deconexiones – Relations et Déconnexions – Relations and Disconnections. Heidelberg: Heidelberger Universitätsverlag HeiUp, pp. 143–157.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/catalog/book/314>

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# **Reshaping Glocal Dynamics of the Caribbean**

Relaciones y Desconexiones – Relations et  
Déconnexions – Relations and  
Disconnections

Edited by

Anja Bandau, Anne Brüske and Natascha Ueckmann

HEIDELBERG  
UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING

### **Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.



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The electronic, open access version of this work is permanently available on Heidelberg University Publishing's website: <http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de>.

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-heiup-book-314-4

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.314.534>

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*Cover image:* © Gabriel Baptiste, detail from *Nuit carnival*. Gabriel Baptiste was born in Marie-Galante (Guadeloupe). He is a self-taught artist. He lives and works in Poirier Pigeon Bouillante (Guadeloupe). For more information: <http://www.gabrielb.fr/>

ISBN 978-3-946054-89-4 (PDF)

ISBN 978-3-946054-88-7 (Hardcover)

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## **Materialities and Mobilities: A Note on the Political Geography of Contemporary Caribbean Art**

Caribbean art offers a useful vantage point onto current controversies about the materiality of culture and the geography of movement. Where the rhetoric of globalisation has taken hold in the public funding, exhibiting, and scholarly conceptualising of contemporary art, artists have come to experience a mixed picture of the opportunities that are posed by global flows of money, artworks, and the ideas about them. This is the view taken from a round up of fieldwork conducted since 2010 at multiple sites: Suriname, Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica, Cuba, and Guyana, and their connections to the wider Atlantic. I suggest that the ground-level perspectives of artists – formed from their efforts to make art, to make a living, and to create community – offer a political and geographical field. This article sketches out how the current demands being placed on Caribbean artists and their art to participate in movement presents various choices for the study of materiality and mobility, and with the potential to consolidate a sense of Caribbean community through the arts.

### **1 On and Off the Art Historical Map**

When I first went to the Caribbean to conduct research as an art historian in 2004, for many (if not most) of my colleagues in the United Kingdom it may have seemed that I had conveniently ‘dropped off the map’ of art history. As much as I winced at that assumption at the time, my colleagues were probably generally right, insofar as the geographical scope of the discipline of art history did not seem to stretch very far in any one direction, at least not much outside Europe and North America, or was at least able to admit a list of other locations in the notional ‘non-West’ that left the Caribbean well and truly out. When I returned home in 2005, I embarked on writing a book about how the Caribbean has largely been ignored in the tradition of art-focused scholarship generally: how its art has been rendered backward and even provincial, in relation to the supposed cutting-edge of developments in northern Atlantic metropolises. The Caribbean has been subjected to imputations of belatedness with regard to the

pace of its uptake of artistic modernism; to provincialism in its supposed remove from the ‘cutting-edge’ of art’s development; and to anachronism, in the Caribbean’s continued attachment to ethnic difference and identity, when the mainstream of contemporary art has reportedly given them up (Wainwright 2011). That volume shows how artists have coped with such a rendering, and how ultimately they have subverted its terms. Painters such as Aubrey Williams, Denis Williams, and Frank Bowling, born in the early days of the twentieth century in what was then British Guiana, are exemplary of the transnational lives that animated a history of art that has come (retrospectively) to offer an urgent critique of Western-centrism, while pointing the way to a more open and liberated view of creativity in which the cultural field centred around the (former) imperial metropolis is transformed through Caribbean participation in the arts. That continues to be true for succeeding generations, e.g. black British artists – artists of African, Asian, and Caribbean backgrounds – who emerged in significant number in the late twentieth century or contemporary art communities of the English-speaking Caribbean and their global diasporas. Whatever the case may be, these artists and art practices have engaged with a ‘politics of time’ in order to challenge how northern Atlantic, metropolitan culture had treated art and artists of the Caribbean.

The subtraction of the Caribbean from the mainstream of attention to art is more complex a situation than suggested by the commonplace statements advocating for multiculturalism in the academy. A complaint often rehearsed is that Caribbean art and artists are under-represented or ‘invisible’ in the dominant narrative of modern or contemporary art, with its spatio-temporal ideology of a world-leading art that orbits a Western (white, male) subjectivity. Since the mid-2000s, indeed, the Caribbean, in tune with the wider ‘global turn’ in art history, has joined a host of other regions – Africa, Asia, the rest of the Americas, their diasporas – and emerged from an unforgivably large blind spot on the notional art historical map. They have come to figure more prominently as a global cultural presence, coming into view through art fairs, exhibitions, biennials, and significant books and articles. One result is that art of the Caribbean now, more than before, seems set on upstaging the older centres of modernism that have dominated the discipline, outshining the sort of art that for so long held the attention of art audiences in the global North. Accordingly, a case could be made that the changing relationship between the Caribbean and the wider world deserves much closer attention by way of the arts, with the arts working as a sort of barometer of the developing climate of global connection that implicates the Caribbean.

## 2 Mobility and Caribbean Art

These changes are framed by the rather normative view that for art, any art today, to qualify for attention, it really needs to be *mobile*. It has to be not merely international but transnational and migratory, possessed of the ability to overcome or even dissolve boundaries in favour of a more borderless global space. Terms such as ‘global contemporary art’ ring up many of the same associations as globalisation itself on that score, and a great deal has been invested to polish the rhetoric about the unqualified good that comes with the physical movement of flows and transition (for instance [Belting/Buddensieg/Weibel 2013](#)). Moreover, art seems to have been singled out for its ability to assist with cultural intermixing and cross-fertilisation, its work as a medium for global exchange. From that view, art helps to stimulate global networking. And where art seems to be reflexive in critically considering the very patterns of its dissemination and movement, it has been declared to manifest the ‘global’ qualities that distinguish today’s emergent visual creativity.

If this is already a familiar account, then I make no apology for that, since the more closely one scrutinises the dominant view of contemporary art the better. This ‘global imperative’ has brought with it a new range of attention that admits the Caribbean, and that region’s art and artists of the Caribbean are travelling new distances. But I wonder how such movement is experienced on the ground, so to speak, among Caribbean art communities themselves. What is happening to Caribbean communities as they try to enjoy the celebrated connectivity of global mobility?

Overlooked in general about mobility in and for the Caribbean is that movement has always and constitutively been there, having historically shaped the region. Much as in the past, mobility today is both a broad field of challenges as well as opportunities, and it is unhelpful if not impossible to sort migratory movements into those factored by forces of ‘push’ or ‘pull’. Mobility remains integral to an appreciation of the Caribbean as perhaps one of the liveliest and yet troubled cultural landscapes in the world, having undergone dramatic changes in the later part of the twentieth century which it is still coming to terms with today. It has suffered severe economic and political crises since the decades of independence of the 1960s and 1970s, and weathered an array of globalising currents that are putting particular pressures on small islands and territories in this interstitial zone of the Americas. In a climate of mounting national debt and instability, countries such as Suriname saw many years of civil war while other nations (including Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago) have witnessed numerous episodes of political violence and social unrest. The neoliberal aspirations that shape tourism-oriented economies – Barbados, Curaçao, Aruba – are carried on stormy waves of volatile commercial

return. Whether voluntary or forced, Caribbean migration has continued apace and to a point where the identities of Caribbean people can no longer be easily associated with a single, regional geography. These challenges to a Caribbean community – fractured by distance and threatened with uncertainty – are being faced by a transnational diaspora of people who live on all the shores of the Atlantic. It is a community engaging more deeply than ever in re-establishing and maintaining a sense of connection by countering their displacement by building networks, undertaking travel, and exchanging ideas and information (see for example [Sheller 2009](#)).

Yet Caribbean mobility is not all of a piece; its forms have to be differentiated and specified. Obviously, movement is disruptive for a life lived *in situ*, upsetting for a conception of community grounded in one place. It seems to call for other forms of movement, or counter-movements that would serve as vitally necessary in the attempt to compensate for such disruption – providing bridges, avenues or sinews of connection that can sustain communities in their efforts to endure despite the challenges of distance and discontinuity. There are modes of mobility that actively favour those Caribbean people whose lives fall across so many sites, so hectically distributed; but mobility per se holds no guarantees of providing a living or holding a community together. Whether we are speaking of a mobility of the ameliorative sort or not can be evaluated against the background of subjective experience and the degree of individual self-selection and choices over movement. If mobility were simply an unqualified good then the geography of movement would be nothing if not virtuous, a morphology of willed travel and relocation. But that choice is not always there, and there is a need to determine under what contingent material conditions (including with what cultural resources) Caribbean individuals are able to face down the surrounding pressures to move.

The issues attending the politics of interrelations between community, place, and space came to be more palpable in two research projects that ran back to back from 2010 to 2014. Here, we looked at the Dutch-speaking, English-speaking, and Spanish-speaking parts of the Caribbean region and their diasporas. In particular, we addressed in depth the same matter of subjective experience and mobility. Here were complex, often fraught relations that spanned a wide geography, encompassing Suriname and the Netherlands, countries like Barbados, Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica and the United Kingdom, Cuba and North America.<sup>1</sup> Some of this work resulted in the recently published collection that I edited together with the art historian Kitty Zijlmans, and I want to build

<sup>1</sup> “Creativity and Innovation in a World of Movement” was a collaborative research project funded under the first round of Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA), European Science Foundation, that ran from 2010 to 2013. Funded jointly by the

on that to note that there is much more to be done in establishing a view of the movement of art and artists of the Caribbean as they are displayed and promoted within and outside the region itself, in spaces of representation and consumption as various as Rotterdam, Hartford in Connecticut, London, New York City, Liverpool, Nagoya in Japan, Victoria in Canada, Darmstadt in Germany, and so on. Caribbean artists and their artworks are not alone in characterising the sort of conjunction of forces that shape everyday Caribbean lives as people travel and sojourn around the Atlantic in their various bids to maintain community. Yet these tensions, difficulties, points of resistance, agonistic relations, and negotiated practices remain somewhat hidden beneath the more celebratory rubric for contemporary art. In turn, they hold particular implications for how space itself is to be considered, and the need to develop this sort of geographical scholarship has involved art historical approaches coming to level with more synchronic ones, while cutting across disciplines.

What I fear is that academic discourse, with its general enthusiasm for Caribbean examples of migration, exile, transnationalism, and so on, will have added confusingly to the mix of misrecognitions that mask how Caribbean art and artists are struggling in the face of disruptive and even exploitative sorts of movement. Applying the specialist vocabulary of an anthropologist such as Maruska Svasek, we may say that Caribbean identities are certainly formed or forming through being ‘in movement’, but that various modes of “transit, transition and transformation” (2010) can hamper as well as stimulate visual creativity, and do so in ways that should precipitate a mood of scepticism toward the rhetoric of global mobility as an inherently positive aspect of contemporary life.

In response to these political circumstances, I propose a mode of inquiry that sees works of art as creative, material practices in various states of process along a path of movement, never having reached a final destination or significance. Enlarging on that geography of movement demands an approach that brings out an ethics of understanding artists and communities of the Caribbean, drawing together considerations of mobility with those around materiality and in turn requiring a novel way of seeing each of those terms.

Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Netherlands Scientific Organisation (NWO); ‘Sustainable Art Communities: Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean’ ran from 2012 to 2014, with the resulting publication: Wainwright/Zijlman (2016). The further development of this research, outlined here, was kindly supported by the award of a Philip Leverhulme Prize for History of Art, given by The Leverhulme Trust, UK.



### 3 The Caribbean and ‘the Global’

What I have found personally is that my own travel for the purposes of research has been much like the dominant conceptualisation – free flowing and borderless; elective – but that is not how artists of the Caribbean, in the main, have come to see and undertake movement. In the crucial differences between us, there lies at least another and an important side to the story of the Caribbean’s celebrated inclusion under a discursively ‘global’ heading. Listen to the majority of artists of the Caribbean, those who are not enjoying the spoils of a globalising art scene, and the difficulties and the frictions of movement around the globe will come back into view. They paint not some rosy picture of positive change for Caribbean art communities but one that they wrestle with, in contradistinction to the enthusiasm for global movement. Artists’ perspectives share much with the powerful critiques once levelled at globalis/zation, its disadvantages and discontent raised by scholars and through public protest. For example, the artist Winston Kellman, writing from Barbados to highlight a long-running “(dis)connection between local and global expectations for Caribbean arts,” (2016: 87) has advanced a personal and contingent response. His politics centre on refusing such “global expectations,” specifically that artistic success may be epitomised by the traducing of locally-distinctive identities and art practices. His is one of many appeals to the Caribbean’s art communities centred in the region in the hope that they will try to sustain themselves against a global imperative. He singles out the impact of cultural values and markets that diffuse a regime of taste and cultural consumption that does locally-grounded Caribbean experience no favours. Kellman writes:

The fact that some institutions in the Caribbean region seem to encourage the production of work to meet the market needs of an outward/international-looking audience means, to some extent, that younger artists are in danger of denying their lived realities in order to find acceptance in this more globalised space. (Kellman 2016: 86)

When such ‘younger’ artists, the emerging generation of practitioners – recent graduates, art students – try to target a more global circulation for their art in the newly establishing network of sites for art’s reception, they tend to do so by embracing technologies and media of art production that are themselves a metaphor of “(dis)connection.” All such patterns mark out a geography of movement in which artworks and artists apparently detach themselves from the material constraints of the Caribbean at the same time as supplying the semblance or simulacrum of attachment to place that would satisfy the “global” demand for a (manufactured) “local” flavour. There is inspiration to draw here, when recognising the widely felt desire to sustain a robust and vibrant

Caribbean community, for a plethora of critical responses from the arts. It is worth highlighting that Caribbean artists themselves have frequently raised the issue of how to build lasting connections and communities in such a way as to circumvent the economies and discursive categories of ‘the global.’ Caribbean voices such as Kellman’s have asked whatever happened to the region’s politics of independence in the wake of twentieth century anti-colonial nationalism, when the soft-power vehicles of cultural resistance and a sense of sovereignty (ascribed to a widening spectrum of creativity in the framing literature on Caribbean culture) seem to have lost their power and direction. Indeed, how may Caribbean communities see the way toward an alternative, longer-term prospect for understanding and supporting themselves in the face of globalisation without reverting to a chauvinistic localism, nationalism, anachronistic or otherwise, and an entrenched identity politics?

That question has led in part to a critical look at the Caribbean’s celebrated diversity and transnationalism, finding it to be mirrored in the vocabulary used to effusively promote art’s globalising currents. Also, with an eye on Barbados, the art critic and historian Therese Hadchity here sees “the need for a more careful consideration of certain art and artists from the Caribbean which would serve, on the one hand, as a contribution to the ongoing critique of globalisation, and, on the other, to an exploration of current tensions surrounding nationalism in the postcolonial world.” (2016: 32) With some justification comes the lamentable conclusion that scholars in the arts, humanities, and social sciences have contributed layers of prose that pose lasting problems for Caribbean artists, obscuring with wishful discourse the actual experience of movement under conditions of patronage and public reception for their art.

Indeed, extolling the alleged benefits-for-all of contemporary cultural exchange in an expanding globalising field seems to give little heed to the fact that for many Caribbean artists, the ‘milk and honey’ of globalisation are not roundly enjoyed. Influential commentary stands a world apart from the actual struggles to negotiate a livelihood for artists in conditions of inequity. Much of the elaborate theorising about the cultural virtues of global mobility seems unaware of Caribbean experience on the flipside of globalisation. This is an adverse outcome of commodifying the imagined geography of interaction and intermixing that has long been identified with the Caribbean in cultural commentary. At the same time, the salient theorisations of ‘global contemporary art’ (metropolitan curatorial mission statements and interpretative texts, art criticism, advocacy arguments for the charitable funding of art in the ‘global South’ etc.) do endeavour to account for the arts as a virtuous space of ‘dissensus,’ where participants fall out with one another or openly clash, yet always productively, in demonstrations of cultural confluence by indirection. Art of the global contemporary has latterly come to be portrayed as a pedagogical place

of healthy disagreement, fractious yet bountiful social critique. Cultural clashes may be spectacular but are ultimately redemptive. In his overview, Peter Weibel sounds a typically jubilant note: “Contemporary art in the global age addresses the opportunities for a gradual transformation of the culture of this capitalist world system and the attendant difficulties and contradictions as well as the opportunities for developing an understanding of other cultures and their equality, assuming that such art takes such qualities seriously and is worthy of its name.” And: “Translations and transfers from one culture to another, in a multilateral and multipolar world, no longer create the hegemony of international art, but the reevaluation of the local and the regional. [...] In this sense we are living in a postethnic age; we encounter the postethnic state of art.” (Weibel 2013: 24, 27) But those “translations and transfers” are more modest than is boasted of them and there is little agreement that we have reached a “postethnic state.” That such authoritative commentators can become intrigued by the potential held at the resistive underside of life in the arts may be a sign of their remove from the actual sites and subjects of struggle. There hegemonies and differences, ethnic or otherwise, are hardly evaporating or in transcendence. The “local and the regional” become alienated when their principles and narratives are mediated and retold in order to satisfy metropolitan taste.

The means to take part in such a scene of reputedly “transformative” encounters are not all shared by art communities of the Caribbean. Nor is the will to enjoy that process, or a sense of hope that it is one that the Caribbean can sign up to on its own terms, even less so without joining forces with similar art communities across the global South. What is the larger purpose of exposing the comfortable distance that permits such liberal hopefulness in cultural globalisation and its twice-remove from Caribbean experiences of conflict, trauma, forced movement and material deprivation?

Through a political economy of art that ranges geographically, we may sketch in episodic and often localised patterns how various stakeholders in the contemporary art scene in the Caribbean and its global diasporas (international art agencies, regional art organisers, and local bureaucrats) are positioned vis-à-vis international money, foreign, regional, or national cultural policy priorities, and, in particular, flows of arts funding. Just as importantly, in that same self-reflexive mode, it is crucial to come to understand how claims for the future for art of the Caribbean and its diaspora have come to shape and direct cultural policy, justified the operations of institutions and organisations for the arts, the morphology of its funding systems, and not least the patterns of movement for its artists. These issues, which bear on the future prospect of sustainability for Caribbean communities, are especially pertinent across the linguistic divisions of the Caribbean. The more common channels for comparing Caribbean experiences cross-linguistically have tended toward Anglophone,

Francophone, and Hispanic contexts, and the spectrum of creolisations among them. But this has overlooked less obvious interactions – English and Dutch – and hidden the losses of dismembering the Caribbean region according to its language units. Bridging the boundary between typically separate linguistic contexts should cause a refocusing on the primary matter of how and for whom different languages feature significantly in the arts, while testing the ways that linguistic diversity may correspond with art’s putatively communicative capacities.

Finally, when looking at the challenges of building a sustainable community for the Caribbean according to the means offered by the arts, it is worth pausing to reflect on the burden of expectation that is being placed on the arts to serve such a role. Vigilance is needed toward the danger of instrumentalising the arts, to avoid mistaking them for mere tokens in an economy of international ‘exchange,’ playing with the arts and their practitioners in a game of cultural translation across linguistic territories. Space has to be cleared for unpacking the normative values that are ascribed to the arts, the unexamined normativity of historically transmitted notions about aesthetics and individual creativity, taking as a starting point the process of defamiliarising all such terms with attention to the specificity and contingency of art as a materialising practice.

#### **4 Materiality and the Imaginary**

In an anthology of texts that I edited with the Norwegian museum anthropologist Øivind Fuglerud we underline “the fact that humans have a developed awareness of what goes on outside their immediate material environments, such that the material world is not the boundary of all thought and feeling” (2015: 11). We go on to explain our interest in “a nexus of projected futures and remembrance which enfolds humans with the material world [...] towards a notion of the imagination and a field of imaginaries.” (Wainwright/Fuglerud 2015) My focus on art of the Caribbean should encourage the sort of analysis that tackles the enfolding of the imagination by actual material relations in their quotidian state while maintaining an analytical distinction between the imagination and the imaginary. In other words, materiality describes the matter – the fabric, the form – in which the imagination takes palpable shape, becoming perceptible and visible as a *work* of the imagination or artwork. This helps to augment the older *materialist* understanding of social life – accounts that emphasised the material basis of all social relations – by suggesting in new ways that cultural practices offer more than a field or medium for the representation of such relations. Applying that lens to the study of art, the imaginary

takes hold through an “institutionalising” of the imagination (Castoriadis 1987) – creativity in the hands of artists, and materialized through their works – in the process of the imagination coming to merge somewhat messily with the surrounding beliefs and social practices. If merge is really the right word at all since there always remain divergences and convergences between the individual imagination and a more shared imaginary. Within the category of the imaginary can be included not only the actual political economy of contemporary art but its discursive visions, drawn from academic discourse on globalizing cultures, multiculturalist policy in the arts, and indeed the global art market. Such imaginaries may clash with the imagination; the meeting of their horizons indeed may constitute zones of clashing and insuperable difference. This sort of conceptualisation cannot be simply overlaid upon a diagram of aesthetics and politics as interacting but essentially with their origins at poles apart, as in common parlance about objects of ‘art’ versus those of ‘use.’ It rather suggests that the imagination may be mediated through social imaginaries to a considerable degree, but that a given work of art may also ‘set up’ a world where social imaginaries act decisively upon it.

With all that in view, I want in closing to discuss how such a broader theorisation may transpose onto the sites and spaces of mobility for the Caribbean’s art communities, in particular how the imagination is given material form and mediated in relation to the imaginaries that frame mobility. That is a response to the simple question: To what extent are the patterns of transatlantic movement that connect the Caribbean and the wider Atlantic world ever really about a beneficial sort of material mobility?

The geographer David Harvey, in his article on ‘the right to the city,’ (2008) has provided a clear answer in the general case at least. There is nothing virtuous about such global movement. All that becomes mobile along any ‘growth path’ of movement are the materials (the capital, the goods and services, the human bodies and labour) of global capitalism itself. Bringing that view to bear on art of the Caribbean, we would need to add that such materials are subtended by conceptualisations of ‘the global’ that demand a requisite field of cultural production and aesthetic value – simply put, the domain of ‘global contemporary art.’ That discursive field indeed maintains the inequalities of both kinds (material and cultural) between diverse regions of the Atlantic. The key to seeing these inequalities at work relies on being able to disentangle the celebration and associations of mobility (the idealisation of a shared, open, multicultural, and transnational space for art – if you will, a transatlantic imaginary) from the actual experiences of movement and labour for Caribbean artists and their material representations. The results should cause us to question why the agency of artists of the Caribbean is so circumscribed by the morphology of art’s infrastructure in the metropolitan North (in areas such as art institutions,

its funding and cultural policy frameworks), and how this geography is marked by the notable institutional absence and policy vacuum in diverse Caribbean countries.

These social relations pertaining to the Caribbean are materialised and mediated through art's ostensible detachment from such conditions of inequality. Accordingly, we should not overlook the falsity of that sense of detachment. There are actual, traceable links between an idealized art of liberalising 'globalism' and the vicissitudes of globalisation. Such relations disprove theories of a virtuous art or cultural activity that the whole world may grasp or enjoy. Apologists for an art of 'globalism' will harp on the historical pedigree of contemporary visual creativity, finding its origins in a conception of art's irreducibly material presence, arguments for its contribution to 'civil society,' and how art's public circulation and visibility, from when Europe's art academies were founded, became the signifier of an inclusive and educated body politic. During the Enlightenment allegedly art came to 'speak for itself,' freed from private patronage and the Church, and we should marvel at its spread and the persistence of such a notion of its civic value. That once-regional (European, metropolitan) and thereby parochial model of art's broader social effectiveness has become widely appropriated at countless urban centres throughout the world in re-localising ways (Jones 2016). But this genealogy needs to reckon with how art today cannot – indeed, if it ever did – 'speak for itself.' How could it? By severing its relation to contemporary capital and surrounding political geography, exercising the cognitive capacity to reflect on its circumstances? Would not such disengagement only work counterwise, by providing the semblance of autonomous creativity, unpredictability and even 'freedom' that capital would then try to exploit (cf. Gielen 2009: 38–40; Dimitrakaki 2012)?

Predictably, there is a corresponding, prevailing discourse that idealises contemporary art and ascribes it similar value for the Caribbean; encouraging the region to see art as the medium and basis for free transfer, as a nexus of creativity that can spread across national borders and traverse geographical space. Art of the Caribbean is exploited in two discursive and converging currents: the prose of breathless excitement about a present day (art)world-on-the-move, which describes mobility as a leitmotif of culture undergoing globalisation, and the elaborating theorisations of the Caribbean as an abiding example of (g)local relations underpinned by movement. That has helped to make material, to materialize in fact particular motivations for urban regeneration or expansion, for distributing resources for the arts and legitimising their denial to others, and for justifying the movement of art and artists from place to place. We need to know more, consequently, about how Caribbean art is being used or produced to satisfy the demand for mobility rather than vice versa, as in those conventional accounts where movement is seen simply to be an inciden-

tal aspect of naming the new, ‘global’ art. And, crucially, we should ask how the imperative to be globally mobile comes to *actively produce Caribbean artists themselves* by transforming them into materials that can be mediated and made to travel.

## 5 Mobility, Immobility, and Political Action

Initiated in earnest in the academy during the 1980s, research on diaspora cultures and histories for all its depth of focus has tended, however, not to look directly so much at the matter of movement itself, preferring to address instead the everyday practices and psychic processes that evolve in the found conditions of exile and displacement. Not until the development of a focused sociology of mobility have the diaspora communities that people the Caribbean, on all shores on the Atlantic, come to be understood for their exemplary role in the experience of modernity and contemporary global change (see [Urry 2000](#); [Cresswell 2006](#); [Sheller and Urry 2006](#)). This more recent work promises to deepen the existing understanding of the field of cultural representation, especially those cognitive forms of practice that are geared to overcoming the violence and uprooting of transatlantic slavery and indenture. The descendants of those “conscripts of modernity,” as the political anthropologist David Scott aptly named them, may have strived in multiple and historically exemplary ways to produce a sense of self, unity, and locality ([Scott 2004](#)). Yet for the diaspora cultural consciousness that ensued, that sense of ‘home’ has been confined to philosophical and mythical places to which communities will never return, altogether “imaginary homelands” as the writer Salman Rushdie called them ([1991](#)). In Caribbean Studies more recently have emerged compelling geographies of these cultural longings and strivings, which see the Caribbean region as an interconnected, archipelagic cultural formation, linked corporeally and extra-corporeally with Africa, Asia, and Europe, such as in Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* ([1997](#)). That has inspired a more radical approach which reimagines entire continents as islands and littorals with marine and submarine connection. Its apparent aim is to provincialise everyone, to decentre the entire globe (cf. [Stephens 2013](#)), exploding its maps of inequity, its pinpoints of privilege, and swathes of majority underdevelopment. That would make general the particularities of Caribbean experience in an expansive vision of how the entire world in its multiple, intersecting zones continues to come into being through movement.

Reflecting on the lessons drawn from the Caribbean, there is every reason to suggest that scholarship needs to be more mindful of the prevailing moral view that is taken of movement – the moral pressure to see mobility only ever

as a positive phenomenon and to embrace it through participation. There is of course the necessity to move that faces communities of the Caribbean, which is set against the desire for stillness, rootedness, stability – the certainties of local sustainability, the coupling of the sustainable and the local. Notwithstanding the psychic morphology of diaspora's imaginary homelands, however, it seems clear that Caribbean people, within or without the geographical region itself, are very able to distinguish between being 'home' and 'abroad', between forced and voluntary movement, all the more so for being shuttled and shifted from place to place. They understand that the cosmopolitan dream of everyone being a 'citizen of the world' is tainted with liberalistic doublespeak. What it is to be an artist has gone the same way.

There are some illuminating parallels here with our work in the academy. Many of us have heard the call to engage more fully with the dynamics of movement by exploring the global relevance of our respective disciplines. Personally, I have been long immersed in those debates and initiatives in art history that have propelled a sea change in the university curriculum, largely in its efforts to do justice to or to mirror the multiculturalism in our wider society (cf. [Wainwright 2010](#)). But to what extent is that informal project of curriculum reform driven by a moral response to global movement? Where is the intellectual space for examining such a question when mobility has become intrinsic to academic modes of knowledge production, a cause and effect of our current 'global turn'? Mobility has a role not only in the expanding global markets of art (or the programmes of art museums as they seek to traverse space) but in the accompanying expansion (and, where I stand in the UK, that also means the market expansion) of our universities and their curricula. Although we undertake movement and practise a moral logic of mobility, we seem exempt from trying to understand it. I worry then that we may at the same time lose a sense of the inequalities pertaining to the conditions, means, and experience of mobility, especially the right to choose when and where to move or whether to stay put and not to move at all. That right is evidently not shared by all and has come to seem more of a privilege.

Finally and consequently I will sound a simple note about political action (indeed, what else?). We may wonder what artists of the Caribbean can do in order to change their less than ideal circumstances, and how they can avoid the 'ambivalent mainstreaming' as Stuart Hall described their problematic inclusion in the metropolitan art world. Indeed, how can Caribbean artists avoid their sense of community being unsettled, misrecognized, 're-purposed,' or pressed into the service of global capital? There is no easy answer to this last question; some may argue that we are all in the same boat in our search for fixed points of identification, trying to escape uncertainty in a world generally made unstable by movement. Here is one suggestion: Maybe Caribbean artists



should refuse to participate until the terms of engagement and conditions of movement improve and until rights over mobility are made clear and extended to all. And perhaps we should halt the development of a ‘global’ art curriculum for the academy in solidarity with them and with artists like them from elsewhere in the world. In any case, I look forward to the day when the artworks and artists I am studying become as mobile or, even better, as electively *immobile* as I am, when the tables are truly turned in this contested political geography.

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