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Reframing Aesthetic Theory in the Caribbean through Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction

Course: ARTH 4750/5750: *Critical Issues in World Art: Contemporary Caribbean Art*

Professor: Dr. Rebecca L. Skinner Green

Abstract

There has been an ongoing struggle to pinpoint the definition of Caribbean aesthetic. Although still framed through Western values of beauty and significance, the Caribbean has been making strides towards breaking out of the artistic definitions of the Eurocentric art history canon. A means of doing so is evident in the works of Livia Ortiz Ríos, a Puerto Rican abstract expressionist artist who frames her art through the Chaos Theory and Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction. The latter's discussion of binary comparisons beautifully mirrors the present binary comparison of Caribbean art to Western art. This work will focus on Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction and explain how its argument fits within Caribbean aesthetic theory.

Key Words: Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction, Chaos Theory, Puerto Rico, Caribbean art, abstract expressionism, cultural frontiers

Caribbean identity, it seems, is defined by everyone except the Caribbean; aesthetics in this region are no exception. Aesthetic theory was founded with Eurocentric ideals of beauty and value which were subsequently superimposed on any European colonies, many of which were clustered in the Caribbean islands. Caribbean cultural and artistic practices, though at first appreciated, were ultimately not valued for the sake of promoting colonization and monetary gain. Colonizers of the Caribbean believed the islands and its inhabitants were meant to be tamed. In order to follow through with this plan, their ill-intent was disguised through positively-framed conquests such as religious missions (Mohammed 135). Artists also portrayed Caribbean inhabitants as praising the colonizers, as if they needed outside help to change their fully-functional society, as shown in Frederick Kimmelmeyer's piece (Figure 1). Today, there is still a struggle with understanding what Caribbean art is. Unfortunately, it appears that Caribbean aesthetic is mostly framed through European constructs of beauty and identity. There is a constant struggle to divide and organize aesthetic into different ethnic and cultural groups. This logic is understandable, as humans are wont to categorize and divide on similarities/differences. However, it is still faulty; aesthetic and cultural identities in general cannot be divided into binaries. Understanding aesthetics in the Caribbean means understanding the cultural diffusion among the islands and beyond—and overall, this multicultural crossroad is deconstructing singular aesthetics (i.e. solely European, African, etc.) in favor of a multicultural Caribbean aesthetic. Due to this, abstract artists, such as Livia Ortiz Ríos, an artist based in Puerto Rico, can develop their own personal aesthetic, and collectively help define the Caribbean artistic identity.

Livia Ortiz Ríos is a rising abstract expressionist in Puerto Rico (Figure 2), a Caribbean island associated with the Iberian Peninsula's diaspora to the New World. While there are plenty of well-established abstract artists within the Caribbean, an artist who is still up-and-coming may better reflect the current environment that Caribbean artists face. An already pre-established artist has escaped the sphere of stereotypical Caribbean art, namely the bucolic landscapes tourists favor. New artists, by comparison, may still be pushing against these artistic boundaries. Ortiz has felt these boundaries herself, stating: "[I] have been told on many occasions that [my art] doesn't look [like] what people expect from Caribbean Art. I believe art doesn't need to be representational to be influenced by your culture. It's part of who you are." Ortiz's art consists of an interesting combination of Puerto Rican and Caribbean influence, as well as the Chaos Theory and Jacques Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction (Ortiz Ríos). Ortiz's artwork greatly focuses on the interplay of shape and space, hierarchical development, movement, and interaction as a whole, playing into the Chaos Theory which ultimately relies on "the laws of motion of various

systems over time” (Chaos Theory). Within her art, Ortiz uses the theory in the concept of feedback and coupling, so the forms in her work can “emerge on their own from a simple system.”

In Ortiz’s works, the interplay of form is clearly visible (Figure 3). Upon further inspection of the artworks, one can see how each layer varies in opacity and fights for dominance within the space. Each layer represents a fragmentation, and the resulting image is the new aesthetic that is developed from the old system; it is up to the culmination of each individual piece to create a new visual experience that it could not create by itself. One could also say that the multilayered compositions Ortiz creates play into the idea of the Caribbean aesthetic as a multifaceted concept or something ultimately made from a variety of cultural influences to create something entirely new. In other words, it is a visual representation of Derrida’s Theory of Deconstruction in relation to fragmenting a system from within in order to create a new meaning. Ortiz expands on this idea of new creation, explaining that “since [her] art works with chaos and order, it seemed important to [her] to note that it is the in between, that point of evolution and transformation where new things are created, far beyond pre-conceptions. In this aspect one can see the reflected political situation in the Caribbean and particularly in [Puerto Rico] more than in the art. In the same way, in [her] work [she reflects] technique, materials, and the installation of the art. Everything helps to reflect this moment of transformation in the in between where dualities and/or binary hierarchies transform into something new.”

As artistic inspiration and reference, Ortiz looks to abstract artists such as Carmen Herrera (Figure 4), Mary Weatherford (Figure 5), and Gertrud Louise “Gego” Goldschmidt (Figure 6). Herrera, a Cuban artist of the late 1900s, has especially been at the forefront of validating new definitions of Caribbean aesthetic. She was one of the first artists to gain popularity, though this occurred in her eighties (Ortiz). Comparing the works of Herrera and Ortiz specifically, one can see the similarity in the play of space and form, and how there is a geometric aspect to the pieces. Both artists use bright colors, using cool and warm to create additional push and pull within the painting. With regards to Herrera, Ortiz hopes that younger generations of artists will receive recognition earlier than Herrera did. It does appear that there are more artists at younger ages who are gaining recognition in the art world, and the hope is that this movement will continue to gain momentum.

While Ortiz more greatly focuses on the Chaos Theory, Derrida’s Theory of Deconstruction is more applicable in regards to Caribbean aesthetics as a whole. Jacques Derrida defines his theory as follows:

“[Deconstruction is] not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that

has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break” (Derrida 6). This theory connects beautifully with defining Caribbean aesthetic as a whole, simply because it is this balance between a preexisting European aesthetic—the “something” that was given to the Caribbean—and the developing Caribbean aesthetic—the “something absolutely new.” The difficulty Caribbean art is facing is whether it is merely an imitation of the colonizing cultures or if it is something new that the Caribbean is developing and expanding out of using the European cultural influences as a springboard. When comparing art of the colonization period to modern art and how the latter appreciates the combination of cultures versus pushes segregation, it is undeniable that Caribbean art is expanding beyond what it was originally was made out to be. However, one needs to ask the following question: how is the Caribbean aesthetic defined when part of it is not “original” in certain people’s eyes, especially when art history has been such a Eurocentric discipline for so long?

Before answering this question, one must first define what the current aesthetic situation is in theory, and secondly define the aesthetic situation within the Caribbean. In the simplest of terms, critics will focus on imitationalism, formalism, and emotionalism when reviewing a piece’s aesthetic value. These terms focus on realistic representation, the organization of forms within the art, and the viewer’s response to the art, respectively (Ragans 31-32). While functional in its simplicity, this breakdown of aesthetics largely ignores the culturally informed aesthetic a piece may have outside of its visual context, and in a way narrows down aesthetics into nothing more than a checklist as to whether or not one believes a piece to be successful or unsuccessful. This narrow view of aesthetics links into the simple, closed perception of Eurocentric aesthetic views versus the expanded views of the Caribbean brought on by multicultural frontiers and thus multifaceted cultural understandings.

As seen in Figure 7, European aesthetic ideal within the Caribbean stemmed from voyagers’ attempts to create a beautiful, other-worldly getaway to appeal to those within the European continent to gain funding, as well as promote settling in these areas to cement claiming the land for their own (Mohammed 293-97). This scenery, while not necessarily incorrect, is still a stereotype in which Caribbean art has remained until recently. Artists such as Ortiz, who are working within the abstract range—and thus are free from any preexisting symbolism there may be in landscape pieces—are able to redefine Caribbean art in a way representational paintings cannot. That is to say, abstract artists, instead of working from within the colonial artistic constraints given to them, are stemming from Western abstract expressionists in order to appropriate the system for their own. However, a main counterargument to the validity of abstract Caribbean art is that it is not the stereotypical landscapes or touristic art uneducated

outsiders expect. Abstract art does not physically embody “swaying palms” and “crystal blue waters.” However, it embodies the Caribbean by representing the artists’ understanding of their home, which may be more valuable, in a sense, than photorealistic landscapes. If art and aesthetic is part of identity, which is largely self-defined, then it is unfair for outside minds to say what Caribbean aesthetic can be. This is why there are issues focusing on ownership of aesthetic, which are based more on a “who came first” idea rather an understanding that aesthetic is something that is shared across the span of space and time.

This European colonization-era concept of aesthetic in the Caribbean promotes superimposed ideals of beauty and identity (at least within island colonies). This is a dangerous game to play. There is no universal standard of beauty, nor should there be, as it “[would] be likely to erase or subordinate an array of human differences and forms of creative expression as being inferior to a select few” (Elliott 3). To have a universal standard of beauty is to erase the validity and value of one’s aesthetic and cultural identity, and in the case of the Caribbean, erases minority cultures and values in favor of a shallow representation of Caribbean art as a bucolic landscape. That is to say, to only qualify Caribbean art based on one standard is to negate other equally valid understandings of beauty—namely, the Caribbean’s own understanding of its aesthetic. It is also dangerous to define a group’s aesthetic as an outsider, as it affixes labels that may grow into stereotypes that are difficult to break out of (which is now what the Caribbean is facing due to years of colonialism). These stereotypes may become the “truth” in the eyes of those who view the world at a passing glance and do not research the deeper truths of a region. Ultimately, this creates an even greater rift between reality and perceived reality, ignoring the true reality to the point that perception becomes the actual truth.

This all comes back to the question at hand: how does one redefine Caribbean aesthetic outside of what Western thought has made it out to be? While this does depend on the presenters and the audience, as well as the intended message, one of the escapes from these labels is shown through Ortiz’s theory-based, artistic frameworks—that is, to work from within in order to deconstruct and repurpose said labels, as stated in Derrida’s Theory of Deconstruction. If deconstruction is based in working within the rules to break and redefine the rules, then what Caribbean artists are currently doing is working within Western ideals of art to break and redefine these ideals. Western culture has predetermined what Caribbean art can be, and it is underlying colonial sentiments that continue to keep Caribbean art beneath the Western art canon—even though the abstract art produced in the Caribbean is equal in technique and design from a basic visual comparison (Figures 8-9). If Caribbean artists work within these

standards set before them and become something greater than what they were told they can be, then who could deny the validity of the Caribbean aesthetic as something unique and greater than the sum of its parts? Outsiders cannot deny that art outside of the constraints they have set is being created; and Caribbean artists are continuing to make the art that is pushing against the walls of the box in which they were placed. It is only a matter of time before the Caribbean can define its own aesthetic as they believe it to be, without the forced perspective that preexisting outside beliefs have promoted for so long.

The fight to take back and redefine Caribbean aesthetic as something other than Western imitation will be a long fight, namely because these Western ideals have been in place so long, and the economic interests of tourism likely will keep these ideals in place for the sake of monetary gain, just like the circumstances during colonial times. As Ortiz mentioned, artists such as Herrera, who have been working for decades, only recently received recognition as a legitimate artist by Western standards. Ultimately, this accepting of Caribbean art is an acceptance of new aesthetic developments within the region. It is just a matter of using the system to one's benefit; the hope is that artists who are imitating the Western system in order to push their own artistic agendas will gain momentum in the near future. Furthermore, the change in aesthetic definition the Caribbean is pushing may change the understanding of aesthetic as a whole; and ultimately, a change in definition would break the barriers for other multicultural frontiers to also break from colonialism and set down their own aesthetic beliefs.

Figures



Figure 1. Kemmelmeyer, Frederick. *First Landing of Christopher Columbus*. 1800/1805, National Gallery of Art Washington, D.C.



Figure 2. Ortiz Ríos, Livia. *Untitled*. 2018.



Figure 3. Ortiz Ríos, Livia. *Untitled*. 2014.



Figure 4. Herrera, Carmen. *Siete*. 1949. Whitney Museum of Art, <https://whitney.org/Exhibitions/CarmenHerrera>.



Figure 6. Weatherford, Mary. *Whittier Blvd.* 2016. David Kordansky Gallery, <http://davidkordanskygallery.com/artist/mary-weatherford/>.

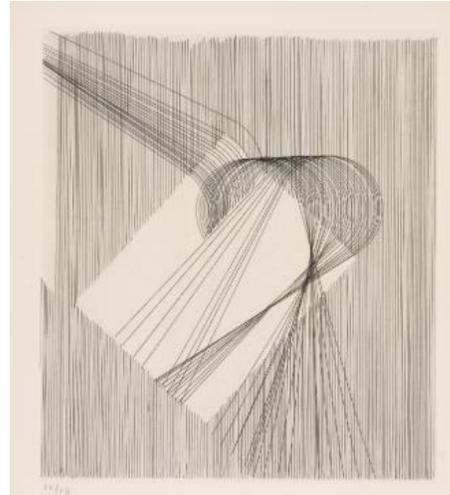


Figure 5. Goldschmidt, Gertrud Louise "Gego". *Dynamic Movement*. 1960. The Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/90648?artist_id=2107&locale=en&page=1&sov_referrer=artist.



Figure 7. Brunias, Agostino. *A Linen Market with a Linen-Stall and Vegetable Seller in the West Indies*. Circa 1780. Yale Center for British Art, <https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1669690>



Figure 8. De Kooning, Willem. *January 1st*, 1956.
Glenstone, Maryland,
<https://www.glenstone.org/artist/willem-de-kooning/>.



Figure 9. Ortiz Ríos, Livia. *Untitled*, 2018.

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