

Book Review

Visual Methodologies and Methods for Caribbean Research: Enacting Epistemic Freedom edited by Joyanne De Four-Babb and Sheron Fraser-Burgess. Bloomsbury, 264 pp., \$240, 2026, 978 1 3504 7408 6

I remember taking an undergraduate course in the History of Art as an elective in college in the US. While otherwise fascinating, the required text, Stokstad's *Art History*, Second Revised Edition, remained vexingly unjust: in the section devoted to the art of the Americas, one was confronted with the image of a sculpture—a silver llama—and the damaging realization that this single Bolivian or Peruvian work (experts were unsure) was being made to bear an incredible representational load. Besides a mysterious embroidered tunic, itself compared to European heraldry, and a temple façade, the entirety of the continent's contribution to art history rested in this single silver llama while, in the same book, scores of pages detailed trends in sculpture, painting, and architecture of individual cities in Early Renaissance Italy. The book perpetuated a legacy of conventional Western periodising of Art History that provincialized the art of the world outside Europe while yet claiming to treat it universally. The word “Caribbean” didn't even merit mention in the index, much less the table of contents.

Fast forward several years: it is the first day of class at the University of Belize, and students of Caribbean Literature file into the classroom to encounter a poem projected onto the wall. The title reads “Trahison”; it is from a collection entitled *Musique Nègre* (1931) by the Haitian poet and diplomat Léon Laleau. The poem is short enough to fit on one slide; it is written in French and translated into English as “betrayal” or “treason”:

Trahison

Ce cœur obsédant, qui ne correspond
Pas avec mon langage et mes costumes,
Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,
Des sentiments d'emprunt et des coutumes
D'Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance
Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D'apprivoiser, avec des mots de France,
Ce cœur qui m'est venu du Sénégal?

Betrayal

This haunted heart that doesn't fit
My language or the clothes I wear
Chafes within the grip of
Borrowed feelings, European ways.
Do you feel my pain,
This anguish like none other
From taming with the words of France
This heart that came to me from Senegal?

In the poem, Laleau offers plaintive criticism of his postcoloniality. He invites the reader to feel his pain “this anguish like none other / from taming with the words of France / This heart that came from Senegal” (*Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal / D'apprivoiser, avec des mots de France, / Ce cœur qui m'est venu du Sénégal?*).

The poem is useful for several reasons. One basic class objective is to highlight something of the linguistic diversity of the region; the poem signals to students that we will admit works in translation. It also stages a postcolonial predicament and—like a good poem does—it models something of the experience (anguish) that it depicts (later in the course we consider Marlene NourbeSe Philip's choral poem “Discourse on the Logic of Language” from *She tries her tongue: her silence softly breaks* (1988), which makes even more explicit this link from “language” to “1/anguish”).

Perhaps most clearly, the poem performs, before the students' eyes, the experience of being educated into a language and a set of forms that are not necessarily culturally affirming, that fail to root in and validate local custom or Indigenous cultures, that remain insensible to Caribbean dispositions. Some version of Laleau's despair lives on whenever Caribbean students open textbooks that purport to offer general principles on the world but leave out their particular experience.

In his book *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (2006), Silvio Torres-Saillant declares that,

It behooves students of the Caribbean, to start from a recognition of the complexity of their subject. [...] They must approach their inquiry armed with an attitude of humility in light of the daunting challenge that the task of learning the Caribbean world represents (p.27).

Torres-Saillant's word of advice on knowing the Caribbean insists on the complexities—linguistic, cultural, geographical, musical, historical—that require one to be humble. Such an attitude is in marked contrast to colonial attempts to apprehend the Caribbean in which, in Julio Ortega's terms, "the new was perceived in terms of the already conceived, the different constituted by what was already known, and the unnamed seen through what had been already read" (2006, p.9).

Whatever else one might say (and one can say a lot about the terror, piracy, violence; the destruction of worlds; the interruption of thought), the colonial project is beset by a distinct lack of creativity—a case in point: the lazy addition of the prefix "new" to remarkably diverse and different landscapes (Nueva España, Nova Scotia, New York...), all these reveal a profound lack of *vision*. This is the intellectual arrogance that led people to uncreatively recycle names for territories they encountered by trying to erase the indigenous and replace it with something at once estranged and familiar.

A latter-day version of this intellectual arrogance persists whenever researchers take up ill-fitting methodologies insensitive to customs and cultures of their homes, sacrificing cultural mores for received notions of academic practice. Caribbean scholars need freeing from such problematic received notions of research. To use Laleau's terms, Caribbean research "Chafes within the grip of / Borrowed feelings, European ways".

The core contribution De Four-Babb and Fraser-Burgess provide in *Visual Methodologies and Methods for Caribbean Research* (2026) is to demonstrate how and why Caribbean research should unmoor from Western methodological frameworks so that it might seek harbour in a Caribbean habitus—the embodied dispositions of Caribbean peoples.

By insisting on a specific kind of liberation signalled by the subtitle of the book: *Enacting Epistemic Freedom*—a term derived from the work of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni—the book enjoins Caribbean researchers to discard colonial attitudes. The collection aims to be liberatory in that it provides examples of Caribbean research that engage the "visuals of Caribbean people's lived experience as data" (p.1) and positions itself within a productive nexus of Caribbean Research Methodologies (CRM), Visual Methodologies and Methods (VMM), and processes of deprovincialization and decolonization.

Further, the book argues, visual methodologies are specifically underutilized in an incompletely decolonized Caribbean where scholars conventionally adopt the knowledge systems of the West to the exclusion of other forms of inquiry. It is no small irony though that, while visual methods may be perceived as less legitimate or lacking in prestige when compared to conventional sources of data, visual metaphors crowd the very language more conventional "exegetical" approaches use.¹ It is conventional for researchers to see, scope, widen, reveal gaps, shed light on, bring into focus, uncover, illuminate, zoom in, draw conclusions, paint pictures, and map out—always reaching for *vision*!

This volume on visual methodologies and methods for Caribbean research rouses those of us working in and on the Caribbean to consider the visual in our efforts to decolonize academic practices and (re)affirm our own ways of knowing. The essays in *Visual Methodologies and Methods for Caribbean Research* feature examples of visual methods used in Belize, Grenada, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Sint Eustatius, and Trinidad and Tobago. They point to sites of action—from villages to schools, shop lots to offices—where visual methods might contribute to the liberatory struggle for intellectual freedom. It is much more than a corrective supplement or inspirational sampler for researchers, however; its active ingredient is anti-*epistemicidal* and part of a much larger project of cognitive justice for the Caribbean.

Though it has a general Caribbean orientation, it is particularly gratifying to see a Belizean node in real formation off the Affirming Methodologies rhizome. The work of the Caribbean Research Methodologies network impelled in no small part by Joyanne De Four Babb (a stimulating agent of CRM in Belize) has resulted in a collection that features an uncommon number of young Belizean scholars and knowledge workers. Despite the clear Caribbean focus, the anthology does not succumb to intellectual xenophobia, or crude academic nativism; it draws heavily on critical threads of Indigenous Pacific Island and African

¹ Pushing back against the theory-speak that characterised intellectual activity in the humanities in the late 20th century, Barbara Christian argued against "The race for theory – with its linguistic jargon; its emphasis on quoting its prophets; its tendency toward "biblical" exegesis [...] its preoccupations with mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations; its gross generalizations about culture" because, as she claimed, it silenced non-European voices.

scholarship through the work of Linda Tuiwhai Smith (2002) and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) for intellectual heft. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's concept of "epistemic freedom" especially encourages the authors (the majority explicitly reference it) to realize the important mission of widening research possibilities through the "liberation of reason itself from coloniality (p.3).

A few of the authors (Dumas; Sanches; Forman and Cano) also cite a seminal Caribbean scholar whose legacy this project clearly also engages even if the book as a whole is not as explicit in acknowledgement: Édouard Glissant. Resonances are clear: the insistence on Caribbean opacity (defined here as our Caribbean difference), and the intentional privileging of ways of seeing and knowing the world that are *for* and *of* the Caribbean. When reading it, another lesson of Glissant is critical: never assume that scholarship *for* and *of* the Caribbean is not also useful for the *tout-monde*. In part, this is because—as Mimi Sheller (2003) puts it—in Western accounts of modernity, the Caribbean is excised, left "on the cutting-room floor" of history, despite its utter centrality to that history (p.1). But it is also useful more broadly for the contribution it makes to a methodological diversity that might protect us from succumbing to imperial logic and being intellectually imposed-upon.

One sort of liberation is present here in reaffirmation of the visual on the assumption that it is already more accessible, translatable, and democratic a form of knowledge than the falsely-universal exegetical sort privileged by conventional Western approaches (Christian, 1989). A major strength of the book lies in how the diversity of approaches on display—from Dumas's theorising a vocabulary of dance and movement (p.169), to remote sensing via Light Detection and Ranging and photogrammetry (Martinez, p.55); participant-driven "collaborative ethnographic filmmaking" (Fernandez and Schill, p.118), painting, graphic novels, photovoice, "Caribbean gestural behaviors" countering phonocentric bias in linguistics (Brathwaite, p.160), "dancing mobiles" of critical visual storytelling (Chapelle and Selvon-Ramkissoon, p.193), drawings, postcards, and maps—all are marshalled in service of Caribbean cognitive and social justice.

In tone, the book is both serious and laudatory. Several contributors make explicit the claim of increased accessibility resulting from visual methodologies whether by enriching data (DeGuerre p.35) or cultural affirmation and knowledge legitimation (Miller) that can help guard against the interpretive errors that follow when Eurocentric assumptions are taken as givens. This current has a climax of sorts in Cayetano's chapter, which performs a liberatory self-examination; records from her own life are "mined" (p.134) in auto-ethnographic mode and the chapter's placement—at the literal centre of the book—feels apt and structurally significant: the first-person point of view is thematically appropriate, being both vulnerable and empowering.

The strongest chapters in the book temper enthusiastic embrace of the visual-as-decolonial-method with reminders of historical and on-going misappropriations and abuses of visual data; they demonstrate ethical safeguards in their research designs and advocate vigilance even as they centre and celebrate Caribbean visual ways of knowing. Several authors invoke problematic disciplinary legacies: Sanches insists on "prioritiz[ing] ethical considerations to safeguard against reproducing inequalities" (p.107); Dumas enacts such safeguards by electing not to video-record the first-person embodied knowledge of dancers during sessions of somatic-ethnography. The questions she poses of her own method—"How do I know that it is not something else?" and what questions must be asked "to ensure that I am seeing the right thing?"—travel well beyond her own chapter; they are pertinent to nearly every visual methodology the collection assembles.

Given the shared thematic and methodological concerns of the authors, it would have been beneficial to afford the authors opportunity to cross-reference each other's work. While Ndlovu-Gatsheni's concept is an explicit inspiration providing a shared repertoire for otherwise disciplinarily diverse contributions, individual chapters do not so much coalesce around this as use it as springboard for individual excursions. The editors bind the collection together in two retrospectively composed sections: the editors' own introduction to the collection and the guest contributors' summative postface; but the chapters do not reference each other directly. Granted, there are practical limitations here, and such a feat might be overly ambitious, but productive internal dialogues between authors converging on similar methods or cultural sites must be implied or constructed by the attentive reader where they are not staged by the book itself.

The book's concluding reflective chapter by Bristol and Bekebu usefully describes visual methods as a reflective mirror for "the assumed unseen and presumed unknown" (p.246). These reviewers issue a caution against over celebration of methods haunted by their colonial past, pointing to the camera's history as a colonial tool for dehumanization of encountered peoples. Many of the authors anticipate the mandate issued here around grounding research in community and cultural obligations born of affirming relationships (p.246). The interrogation of the promise and peril of the visual is an important caveat. I can't help but feel

the cover image depicts a view of the Caribbean Sea that signals more than something of the location of scholarship; it might also serve as metaphor given Caribbean thinking that recognizes the sea as history, promise and peril, an obscuring and a linking—much like the visual itself.²

While the promise of visual approaches is clear, the book's insistence on coupling these with profound decolonial intention seems crucial. In this case, visual methodologies heretofore excluded or viewed with suspicion in academic scholarship become part of the project of provincializing Europe, something necessary for situating the Caribbean in the critical frame and getting a fuller picture of our ever-fraught and ever-valuable collective self-conceptions and shared experiences.

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² In his *Dragmaticon Philosophiae*, a medieval work of optical theory, the 12th Century writer William of Conches declares “All of the senses are false in many ways; vision above all of them is the falsest” ([*O*]mnis sensus in multis sit falsus, uisus tamen omnium est falsissimus)” quoted in Suzanne C. Akbari (2004) *Seeing through the Veil* (p.3 & p.245 n2).

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