

Can there be unity in fragmentation?

“We goin have a mass migration of people, time fi come. No wall cah hold people there, if they want to go over it, doe care how high yuh mek it. Every country connect by water, so can still reach there. If we don’t think bout each otha in a different way, the world nah go... Always gonna be a lot of hunger, and...crime and destruction.”- Tommy Wong

Islands separated by language and distinct settler histories, yet on a clear day one can see the outline of the southern tip of Cuba from the peak of the Blue Mountains in Jamaica. These islands are formed from volcanoes that rose above the sea, a cordillera; perhaps they were once joined under the surface.¹ And yet the tensions of difference flow throughout the Caribbean archipelago, a region whose similarities often seem hindered by the socially constructed divisions of colonization. Why do we continue to uphold the fallacy of nationalist citizenship across the globe, when it is evidently an invention to perpetuate oppression? Simon Benjamin draws his title for the exhibition *sub-marine: jeweler of memory* from Kamau Brathwaite’s essay, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time”.² Across video, photography, found objects and sculpture, he contemplates the grooves of the fissures that create cracks in the region’s foundation. Tommy Wong’s words which begin this essay, and whose interviews and friendship have been integral to Benjamin’s work, echo a forewarning of a crisis to come, and reckon with the lasting effects of environmental degradation. His tone is matter-of-fact as he calls for a re-consideration of relationality.³ It is an inquiry that permeates the writings of Caribbean poet-philosophers Édouard Glissant and Brathwaite, and a discussion which Wong is firmly a part of as a fisherman in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica. His knowledge of the environment comes with years of negotiating the dynamics and challenges of his natural surroundings, in particular the sea. From this he gains an intimate insight into the landscape that allows him to detect even minute changes.

Benjamin highlights links between the Caribbean and West Africa by including photographs *Red Rock, A Return* and *Routes*, which were taken on a trip to Dakar, Senegal. He invokes Brathwaite’s concept of tidalectics, which draws on the metaphor of the sea to emphasize the intertwined relationship

¹ A cordillera is a network of mountain ranges, which often include numerous volcanic peaks. Kamau Brathwaite proposes, following the writing of some geologists, that the Caribbean was once geographically connected as one major mountain range underwater.

² Kamau Brathwaite, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” *Savacou*, nos. 11–12 (September 1975): 1.

³ Glissant, Édouard. “I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to ‘make him’ in my image.” *Poetics of relation*. University of Michigan Press, (1997): 193.

between these regions.⁴ The density of these entangled histories are difficult to parse out; reminders that though thousands of miles away, these areas are always in conversation. A warmth emanates from the turmeric yellow of the formation in *Red Rock* (2020), softening sharp edges and beckoning to be touched. Some minerals may be left behind on your fingertips, traces of histories sedimented over time. Scholar Vanessa Agard-Jones asks us to, “consider sand as a repository both of feeling and of experience, of affect and of history” (2012, 325). How many feet have stepped on Caribbean sands, how many bodies have caressed the shores? Who never made it onto the land? Held in a wooden and glass case in the center of the gallery, Benjamin displays his *Core* series (2023), with three cylindrical sculptures that reference geological core samples made from an amalgamation of sand, cornmeal, and detritus found in Great Bay in St. Elizabeth and Governor’s Island in New York.⁵ Connecting the two locations, he highlights a history of colonial expansion and indigenous erasure. Governor’s Island, originally home to the Lenape tribe, was purchased by the Dutch West India Company, one of the biggest traders during Trans-Atlantic slavery. The sculptures gesture to the sand as a site of accumulation, providing glimpses into manmade excess and natural decay.

In his photographs, Benjamin grapples with layers of sight and *seeing*, alluding to elements that exceed the eye. Water droplets splash across a young boy’s face while he catches a breath, forging a distance from the viewer as he pulls through the sea in the image *A Return* (2020). Can he hear voices beneath the waves? There is an opacity engendered in the images that complicate the ordinariness; a shadowy reflection of a silhouette over the red tarp in *Routes* (2020), or the faint blue paint that distorts temporality in *Paw Paw* (2023) and *Pools* (2023).⁶ The surreal textures each scene.

The *Coin Diver* postcards have a secretive quality that refuses the gaze. Protected behind the folds are divers, young Black boys who swam into the depths of the sea to recover coins thrown to them from white tourists visiting the Caribbean islands in the late 19th and early 20th century. Colonial violence took many forms, but these boys knew they could access territories still unimaginable to those who took for granted all that is held in the expanse of the sea. Through folding, Benjamin shields the boys from further exploitation by the viewer looking *at* them, in a beautiful act of care indicative of a

⁴ Kamau Brathwaite discusses his concept of tidalectics, and uses the metaphor of the ocean that washes onto, and connects, the shores of the Caribbean and West Africa to emphasize the historical and contemporary relationships between these regions. Caribbean subjectivity is always intimately and complexly linked to the African continent. He writes, “What is the origin of the Caribbean?...Where do we come from?...Why is our psychology not dialectical-successfully dialectical- in the way that Western philosophy has assumed people’s lives should be, but **tidalectic**, like our grandmother’s- our nanna’s- action, like the movement of the ocean she is walking on, coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding (‘reading’) from the island(s)”, Kamau Brathwaite and Chris Funkhouser. *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey*. We Press (1999): 34.

⁵ A geological core sample is a section of rock that is obtained through a drilling process into the formation, using specialized tools to maintain the cylindrical sample intact. The samples provide key geological information about a specific landscape.

⁶ Glissant, Édouard. “The opaque is not obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.” *Poetics of relation*. University of Michigan Press, (1997): 191.

feminist ethic that does not seek to make a point by reproducing harm through the visual sphere. He does not tear the images, preserving their integrity and the opportunity for other narratives of their lives to be suggested in the critical fabulation that Saidiya Hartman offers.⁷ We do not need to see or know everything.

Bringing into dialogue footage from Treasure Beach in Jamaica, video interviews with Tommy Wong, archival footage from J.E. Williamson's *The Terrors of the Deep*, which was filmed in the Bahamas, and text excerpts from Kamau Brathwaite, Benjamin presents the 2-channel short film *Sycorax_ videostyle.02*, the second installation in this series.^{8,9,10} The film's title comes from Brathwaite's engagement of Sycorax, which references the powerful witch character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, to describe a shift in his poetic practice by employing digital technology.¹¹ Experimenting with margins, typeface, font sizes and glyphs, which embed a sonic quality into his work, to "make sound visible", he expands forms of creating, performing and consuming poetic texts, and adds a multimedia dimension. Brathwaite describes it as "a use of computer fontage to visualise his sense of dream & morph & riddim drama — videolectic enactment," which allows him to attend to the complexities of Caribbean subjectivity, while also moving away from English colonial forms of writing. Similarly, Benjamin draws on the sycorax aesthetic to interlace different forms of text and imagery, both grappling with the histories that shaped the Caribbean and envisioning potential futures. Visual and sonic poetics emanate throughout the video, from the sea slowly rising and lowering in gaps it has

⁷ In her essay, "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman proposes the practice of critical fabulation as a method to propose other possibilities beyond what is written in archival documents about the lives of those who experienced unfreedom, and in particular, enslaved Black people. Through critical fabulation, one imagine a fullness of life which cannot be gleaned from documents that did not consider Black people as human. She writes, "The intent of this practice is not to *give voice* to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified... and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance." "Venus in two acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14.

⁸ Simon Benjamin is influenced by Krista Thompson's scholarship, and in particular, her text *An Eye for the Tropics*. The following quotes provide context for the Bahamas and Jamaica as critical in the development of tourism representational imagery of the Caribbean. "Starting in the 1880s, British colonial administrators, local white elites, and American and British hoteliers in Jamaica and the Bahamas embarked on campaigns to refashion the islands as picturesque "tropical" paradises, the first concerted efforts of their kind in Britain's Caribbean colonies...while tourism-oriented representations of the Bahamas and Jamaica, whether of land, sea, or human-scapes, often heightened the tropicality of the islands, they also conveyed a domesticated version of the tropical environment and society...these images served as visual testaments of the effectiveness of colonial rule and naturalized colonial and imperial transformations of social and physical landscape." *An eye for the tropics: Tourism, photography, and framing the Caribbean picturesque*. Duke University Press (2006): 4-7.

⁹ Kamau Brathwaite and Chris Funkhouser. *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey*. We Press (1999).

¹⁰ Kamau Brathwaite. "Caribbean Writers and Their Art: History, the Caribbean and the Imagination." *Caribbean Writers Conference* (1991).

¹¹ Brathwaite's 'Sycorax video style' emerged after a series of traumatic life moments, including the death of his wife Doris, the destruction of his archive by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 in Jamaica, and a robbery in which he discusses being killed 'psychically' when a man pulled a gun on Brathwaite, but the chamber was empty. An excerpt paraphrased from text Nicholas Laughlin, *The Caribbean Review of Books*, 2007.

carved out in rocks along the coast, to the sound of gentle waves washing onto the shore as the camera studies the horizon.

Throughout their work, Glissant and Brathwaite riffed upon each other, even as their ideas sometimes diverged. This discourse of mutual citation between them is apparent throughout Benjamin's work, like ocean currents that carry visitors across ever-shifting routes. Ruminating on the two poet-philosophers, scholar Michael Dash identifies Brathwaite's desire to gain a sense of wholeness, even in his acknowledgement of fragmentation, as a clear departure from Glissant, whose poetics do not seek resolution, and rather affirm the multiplicity of identities, experiences and perspectives in the Caribbean.¹² Benjamin's *Sycorax_videostyle.02* cites Brathwaite's impulse towards unity, as he notes, "The Caribbean, although artificially divided... it's really part of a whole underground continent of thought and feeling, and history." Glissant, however, conceives of the "cracks" in the landscape as a generative interstitial space that disrupts homogeneity, leading to the complexities of difference in the region, and in people more broadly. These cracks suffuse Benjamin's practice, both literally in the rock formations he films and photographs, and in his fragmented knitting together and concealing of sections in his work.

For Brathwaite, the "unity is sub-marine" conjures a Caribbean that has always been connected. It is a belief in the sea as a fertile site of imagining regional collectivity, even amidst its myriad differences. For Benjamin, diving into the sub-marine is an opportunity to reflect on the nuances that make up the Caribbean, attending to the complicated realities that linger in the depths and may always evade transparency.

¹² Dash, J. Michael. "Libre sous la mer-Submarine Identities in the Work of Kamau Brathwaite and Edouard Glissant." *For the Geography of a Soul: Emerging Perspectives on Kamau Brathwaite* (2001): 191-200.