

# **BLACK MODERNISMS IN THE TRANSATLANTIC WORLD**

**Edited by Steven Nelson and Huey Copeland**

**NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON**

Distributed by Yale University Press

New Haven and London

# CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE</b>	vi
STEVEN NELSON	
<b>INTRODUCTION: A TROUBLED CONJUNCTURE</b>	<b>1</b>
HUEY COPELAND AND STEVEN NELSON	
<b>SIMONE LEIGH: ACTS OF TRANSFORMATION</b>	<b>19</b>
STEVEN NELSON	
<b>LEAVE NO MARK: BLACKNESS AND INSCRIPTION IN THE INQUISITORIAL ARCHIVE</b>	<b>35</b>
MATTHEW FRANCIS RAREY	
<b>BARE FEET, OR, THE AMBIVALENCE OF EMANCIPATION: CAMILLE PISSARRO AND THE CARIBBEAN</b>	<b>57</b>
C. C. MCKEE	
<b>ON EUROPEAN MODERNISM AND BLACK BEING</b>	<b>79</b>
SIMON GIKANDI	
<b>NANCY ELIZABETH PROPHET AND AUGUSTA SAVAGE: SCULPTURAL HABITS OF BLACK MODERNISM</b>	<b>103</b>
KELLIE JONES	
<b>NUMINOUS AFFECT IN BLACK ATLANTIC MODERNISMS</b>	<b>129</b>
SYLVESTER OKWUNODU OGBECHIE	
<b>DARKNESS AND THE <i>UNVISIBLE</i>: NORMAN LEWIS, ROY DECARAVA, AND POSTWAR ABSTRACTION</b>	<b>153</b>
KOBENA MERCER	
<b>AT THE THRESHOLD OF WITHHOLDING: STANLEY BROUWN'S MODERNIST REPETITIONS</b>	<b>179</b>
ADRIENNE EDWARDS	
<b>SPACES IN THE SHADOWS: ARCHIVES AND ARCHITECTURES IN THE WORK OF CARRIE MAE WEEMS</b>	<b>199</b>
MABEL O. WILSON	
NOTES	228
CONTRIBUTORS	248
INDEX	250



**BARE FEET, OR,  
THE AMBIVALENCE  
OF EMANCIPATION:  
CAMILLE PISSARRO  
AND THE CARIBBEAN**

C. C. MCKEE



In 1856, a young Camille Pissarro, who had arrived in Paris the previous year, painted a small canvas that captures two Black women who stop to chat on a seaside path outside of Charlotte Amalie, the capital city of the artist's natal isle of St. Thomas (fig. 1). St. Thomas and the neighboring islands of St. Croix and St. John constituted the Danish empire's colonial holding in the West Indies until the islands were sold to the United States in 1917; they, along with a number of smaller islands and atolls, form the US Virgin Islands. Pissarro's canvas, along with a corpus of his other paintings and drawings with Caribbean subjects, was executed in the wake of 1848, the year of slavery's abolition in the Danish West Indies. Despite this radical upheaval of colonial policies, it would seem that the artist's representation of Caribbean Blackness could obfuscate emancipation on the painting's surface. The possibility that this small canvas, which measures approximately ten by sixteen inches, could capture the fraught contradictions of Black freedom remains uncertain in the enigmatic intimacy of the depicted encounter. One woman faces the viewer, dressed in white with a patterned red kerchief spilling over her shoulder as she balances a load of thickly painted white fabric atop her head. Her companion turns her back to the viewer; a wicker basket in the crook of her arm, she wears a red headscarf similar to that of the woman in white and a sky-blue dress that rhymes with the bay before her.<sup>1</sup>

They form a pair that seems to converge in a brief moment of respite from their labor, with no overt signs of leisure. But the exact terms of this meeting are opaque. Are we to understand that this painting, made in the wake of emancipation, depicts Black women at rest in the tropical landscape—anathema to the recent memory of slavery's onerous conditions—while their momentary nonproductivity is simultaneously conjoined to the signs of their labor? Could the idle chatter ascribed to these women be characterized instead as withholding a conspiratorial air? Is freedom, from Pissarro's view, the ephemeral moment of rest that punctuates labor under conditions only nominally distinguishable from slavery? Who is to say that these women are free at all?

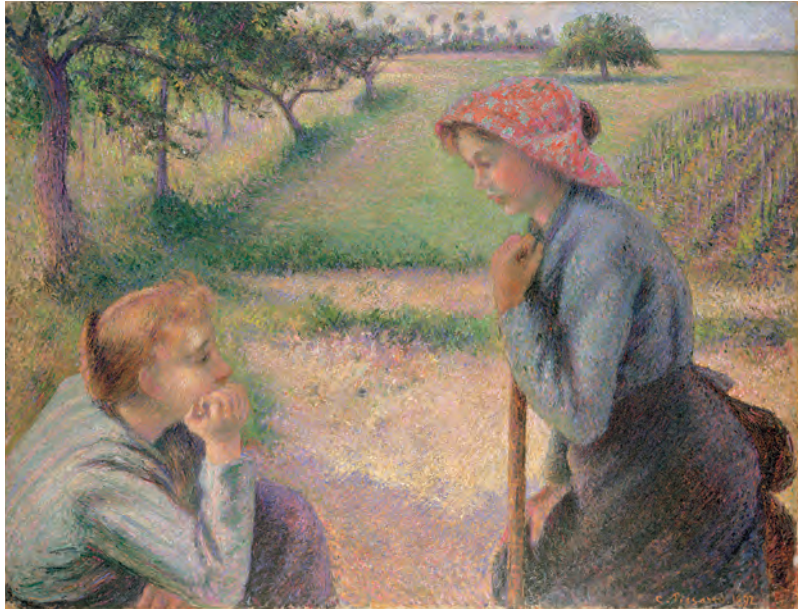
Black women, depicted beyond the confines of the plantation, are central figures in Pissarro's oeuvre of the 1850s and early 1860s. Their appearance—in his early drawings on St. Thomas, in Venezuela, and in paintings executed after moving to Paris—holds two conceptions of Black femininity in tension. On the one hand, Pissarro's representations of the Caribbean conform to a set of types that reduce the appearance of the Black woman to a fixture of the Caribbean landscape, one means of visually dissolving her potential agency during the continued struggle for emancipation and assertion of her personhood. Personhood, as deployed in this essay, stands distinct from subjectivity insofar as subjectivity speaks an impossible cohabitation of Blackness with full political agency in the post-emancipation era as a result of the subject's foundation in the onto-juridical recognition of the state. On the other hand, insisting on the uneasy modernity of Pissarro's images opens up the potential to read these works against themselves. Alternative and contradictory visions



**Fig. 1** Camille Pissarro, *Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas*, 1856, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

of a post-emancipation modernism emerge if one traces the incongruities between the revolutionary leadership of Black women in the Danish West Indies during this period, and the history of representing laboring freedwomen as a symbol of erotic fantasy in the colony.

By attending to the appearance of Black women as less-than-free in this corpus conditioned by their racialized, sexed, and gendered labor, my analysis of Camille Pissarro's drawings and paintings puts pressure on his position in modernist art history as an avant-garde artist and political radical. In these accounts, freedom in a political and aesthetic sense becomes synonymous with the bearded father of impressionism. There are important corollaries between this Caribbean oeuvre and the discussion of Pissarro as a mature artist in the 1880s and 1890s, working in the trenches of the avant-garde for the sake of an anarchist vision. In art historian Linda Nochlin's formative essay "Camille Pissarro: The Unassuming Eye," she lauds his "particular unstrained and accepting modality of urban vision," which "had to do with a kind of freedom which he thought of as freedom of perception."<sup>2</sup> Nochlin's frank assessment of Pissarro's politicized vision presents an artist who used painting to aspire toward overthrowing the bourgeoisie. T. J. Clark similarly highlights Pissarro's naive anarchist politics of freedom in *Two Young Peasant Women* (1891-1892, fig. 2). In this painting of proletarian women who inhabit the leisure "available in the interstices of work," Clark describes how their indeterminate (in)action conveys anarchism's "central assertion in philosophical terms . . . that freedom and order are dialectical moments of one another, and that the



**Fig. 2** Camille Pissarro, *Two Young Peasant Women*, 1891–1892, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman

present horror of the forms assumed by each is due to that dialectic being broken.”<sup>3</sup> He continues by inviting the spectator to “imagine a painter, then, who thought that pictures could be small epitomes of this repressed truth. In them order and freedom would be shown to be reconcilable—indeed not entities or qualities at all without one another.”<sup>4</sup> Again freedom is made a central feature of Pissarro’s painting through his political investments. Painting itself is lauded as the aesthetic conduit able to provide a truth of radical political freedom in late nineteenth-century France. Clark goes so far as to equate modernism with socialism, posing the question, “If they died together [in the late twentieth century] does that mean in some sense they lived together, in century-long co-dependency?”<sup>5</sup> For these art historians it was Pissarro’s fin-de-siècle paintings that, in many ways, reinvigorated the confluence of socialist politics and modernist aesthetics advanced by Gustave Courbet’s midcentury realism.

However, Black womanhood—and the racialized subjectivity proffered to freedwomen by emancipation—is a representational category central to Pissarro’s modernism that goes overlooked and unmentioned by Clark, despite the fact that it is a pair of women, here white and French, who picture Pissarro’s freedom as both anarchist and modernist. “The subject of *Two Young Peasant Women* is a form of sociability, and specifically of mental life, imagined as belonging to women. . . . Because the world of women could be imagined as standing just a little outside, or a little apart from, the struggle with the realm of necessity.”<sup>6</sup> Clark’s emphasis on the gendered dimension of this painting might seem to parallel the intersubjective dynamics of the earlier *Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas*.<sup>7</sup> Yet, an attention to the enduring subjugation of Black women on the island colonies in the mid-nineteenth century reveals the limits of freedom and modernity’s legibility for racialized subjects within extant forms of politics. Of Nochlin and Clark one may, or perhaps should, be compelled to ask:

To whom is the freedom in Pissarro's paintings extended? Knowing that Pissarro bore witness to the legislated freedom accompanying abolition in multiple national contexts, how far back in the artist's life do these arguments extend before they require revision? And, more capaciously, to what extent must histories of modernism continue to be revised if Blackness is brought squarely into the frame of analysis when attending to the contradictory politics of artists assigned the labels of "avant-garde," "socialist," or "radical," of which Pissarro was certainly one?<sup>8</sup>

Rather than retroactively apply Pissarro's later anarchism and impressionism, I read these works as instantiations of a *fantasied colonial memory* executed with a painterly realism that takes a pointedly ambivalent position toward the representation of laboring Black women and blurs the distinction between enslavement and freedom. When describing the artist's early career in Europe, Pissarro's son Ludovic-Rodo suggests, "Pissarro will have made small paintings at this time [circa 1855-1865], based on his memories of the Caribbean."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, these works are, foremost, *memory works*. They are paintings and drawings imbued with the entwined fact and fiction inherent to recollection, executed by a burgeoning artist and future political radical newly arrived in Paris and formed in the Tropics during the age of abolition. Psychoanalytic theory reminds us that memories have only an a posteriori facticity. Temporally fragmented and always conjoined to the present, a memory gains psychic value as a presumed anchor to the external world that is, in fact, a mutable amalgam of conscious and unconscious repressed content.<sup>10</sup> A Freudian approach to memory and fantasy furnishes a modernist vocabulary that elucidates the pictorial mechanisms of Black subjugation I locate in Pissarro's Caribbean oeuvre that exists at the juncture of slavery's immediate afterlife in the colonial Atlantic and nascent European modernism as an endeavor already exclusive to white men.<sup>11</sup>

Pissarro's corpus of Caribbean artworks does not attest to the realities of Black life in the Danish West Indies after emancipation. Rather, they retroact Black being toward bondage in freedom with a picturesque lens. Departing from a strictly Freudian perspective, Pissarro's fantasy of racial subjugation extends far beyond the artist himself; these verdant landscapes populated by Black figures were commercially attractive to a metropolitan audience with a taste for visions of an exotic elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> The exoticizing function of these paintings and drawings—their ability to materialize colonial territories as fully controlled—pushes Pissarro's memory into the realm of fantasy. Fantasy and memory are adjacent concepts in psychoanalysis, conjoined in their compulsion to mitigate psychic stress by achieving pleasure.<sup>13</sup> Distinct from the convincing "reality" of memory, fantasies are imaginary sequences predicated on the illusory fulfillment of a wish and are always, to a greater or lesser extent, distorted from the world toward which they strive.<sup>14</sup> In a given subject, particularly the neurotic in an analytic context, mentally conjuring a fantasy may replace reality, functioning analogously to the (always already distorted) memory.



Pissarro's Caribbean oeuvre as a whole, then, stands to contend with the psychic trauma of modernity as these artworks attempt to fill a gap in colonial memory. These are fantasized representations of the Tropics that tread the ambiguous waters of Black personhood after emancipation in pictorial terms that could equally be said to nostalgize slavery. For instance, the ostensible tranquility of *Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas* recalls the distinct social relations between enslaved people and their oppressors in the Danish West Indies. Public corporeal punishments and domestic forms of injury maintained the fiction of colonial order in Caribbean plantation societies. However, unlike other colonial contexts in the region, Danish juridical procedure contained provisions wherein the enslaved could testify in their own defense, imbuing further nuance into the characterization of these people as speaking commodities.<sup>15</sup> Pissarro's representation of Black women in an indeterminate state between labor and rest produces a fantasy of racial subjugation that countervails emancipated Blackness and the specificity of slavery's history in the Danish Caribbean.

This memory gap is intentionally aporetic, a selective recollection that elides colonial violence in the service of affirming a legislated instantiation of freedom. Freud racialized the unconscious fantasy itself when he stated, one "may compare [fantasies] with individuals of mixed race who, taken all round, resemble white men, but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other, and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges of white people." This prescient metaphor highlights the fact that fantasies, "in spite of their high degree of organization, remain repressed and therefore cannot become conscious."<sup>16</sup> When considered in relation to the integration of freedmen and freedwomen into an imperial polity, Freud's racialized discussion of fantasy reveals the extent to which it is impossible to read Pissarro's works from this period as securely representing a freed population.

These remembered scenes of the Caribbean trace what I identify as the profound ambivalence toward Black freedom and subjectivity in Pissarro's artistic practice during this period, an ambivalence intensified by the conjunction of race and gender in his visual lexicon. Look no further than the crucial asymmetry between the figures in *Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas* that emerges against bright ochre soil and signals these women's politically ambivalent position that rests just beneath the painting's picturesque surface. At the base of their shadows, cast deep under the setting equatorial sun, the woman in white reveals a black shoe and stockinged foot as she steps forward to continue on her way. Her companion in blue stands firm, her bare feet planted on the path before her. Pissarro's class-based distinction between bare feet and shoes is representative of the ambivalence in this transatlantic body of work that precludes the secure ascription of Black freedom without foreclosing it entirely.

As a result of this distinguishing feature, the figure of the laboring Black woman in Pissarro's Caribbean oeuvre exists interstitially—

vestibularly, to modify Hortense J. Spillers's term. As was the case for Black women throughout the diaspora under the conditions of slavery, this figure "became the principal point of passage between the human and the nonhuman world."<sup>17</sup> We must remember that Pissarro's representations of Caribbean women came only a few decades after the death of Saartjie Baartman, or the "Hottentot Venus," who was paraded across Europe as a curiosity and eroticized as a para-human object to be devoured by leering white eyes.<sup>18</sup> The impossibility of securely representing a necessarily free Black subject in Pissarro's post-abolition oeuvre, I contend, demonstrates the extent to which, as Spillers reminds us, "Black is vestibular to culture" in the colonial Americas.<sup>19</sup> This vantage point requires that we look elsewhere for modes of Black personhood cultivated within and beyond the confines of colonial modernity.

Despite his proximity to Black life in the French, Danish, and Venezuelan contexts during the 1840s and 1850s, Camille Pissarro never publicly commented on the end of slavery. Only in a letter from 1878 did Pissarro recount his Caribbean adolescence in terms that aligned his upbringing with his political radicalism.<sup>20</sup> "Being a well-paid clerk in St. Thomas in [18]52," Pissarro averred that he "could no longer stand it there and without any further reflection I left everything and fled to Caracas [Venezuela], finally breaking the ties that bound me to the bourgeois life."<sup>21</sup> Pissarro constructs his youth in the Tropics as a fantasy of class imbued with his later anarcho-syndicalist politics lauded by art history; this epistle elides the fact that the artist lived alongside Black struggles for freedom that were inflected in his early artworks. Instead, he perpetuates their ambivalence by presenting his mobility as the source of a sustained political investment in representations of class devoid of race after his permanent move to France in 1856.



But we have gotten ahead of ourselves; to elucidate the fixation with laboring Black women in Pissarro's oeuvre, it is necessary to understand his relationship to Danish colonialism in the Caribbean. The artist was born on the island of St. Thomas on July 10, 1830. St. Thomas was first colonized in 1671. Its small neighbor to the east, St. John, was acquired in 1717, and Denmark's colonial portfolio was completed with the purchase of the larger and most profitable St. Croix from the French in 1733. Of the three islands, the flat terrain and comparatively large size of St. Croix was best suited for the sugar plantations synonymous with the region. St. Thomas, by contrast, was a central commercial hub for the Caribbean and North and South America because of its open ports and international trade. At the peak of colonial slavery in 1835, the 19,876 enslaved people across the three islands constituted nearly 60 percent of the Danish West Indies' population.<sup>22</sup>

Pissarro was born to a Jewish merchant family with strong French Creole ties, and he was raised with enslaved persons in his home. Danish

census records reveal that the Pissarro family enslaved people throughout his youth and young adulthood.<sup>23</sup> It would seem that his young adult infatuation with representations of Black women began at home. The 1841 census entry indicates that four of the five “unfree living in the house” were women: Catherine, Arabella, Rosa, Petronille, and Alexander. These enslaved members of the household came from across the archipelago—St. Thomas, Martinique, and St. Martin. They held divergent Catholic and Protestant faiths, and were of “good moral character,” excepting Catherine, whose behavior was judged only “tolerable.”<sup>24</sup> In 1841 he was sent to study at the Pension Savary in Passy, then a banlieue of Paris, where he was first trained in drawing.<sup>25</sup> After completing his studies in 1847, Pissarro returned to St. Thomas on the eve of emancipation in both the French and Danish empires. Did these women sit for a young Camille in the months or days preceding and following emancipation? Might they have participated in the uprising when, galvanized by the French proclamation of abolition on April 27, 1848, enslaved people in the Danish West Indies rejected the Crown’s proposition of gradual emancipation from a decade earlier?<sup>26</sup>

Tensions between the white populations and people of color in the Danish West Indies erupted on St. Croix on the evening of Sunday, July 2, 1848, when the enslaved followed the precedent of other rebellions to broadcast their dissent by igniting fires, ringing estate bells, and blowing conch shells to signal the revolt. St. Croix’s small size, measuring only 82 square miles, also facilitated organization. By the next morning some 8,000 enslaved people under the leadership of John Gotlieb (also spelled Gottlieb) Bordeaux (also spelled Bourdeaux), called General Buddhoe or Buddoe, converged at Frederiksfort on the western end of the island to stage a general strike and demand their immediate freedom.<sup>27</sup> To this point, the general strike against slavery in the Danish West Indies was distinctive for its nonviolence and the leaders’ insistence on peaceful protest. Withholding labor and the refusal to continue being enslaved was protest enough to expedite the immediate abolition of slavery by Governor von Scholten that very day. Despite these efforts to maintain peace, insurrectionary violence erupted early the following morning when an outfit of Danish troops led by Colonel de Nully came across a “band of the now emancipated peasantry . . . and their leader armed with a musket (who was shot).”<sup>28</sup> For the following three days, the colonial leadership was thrown into turmoil as recently freedmen and women destroyed the materials that symbolized their slavery.

The revolution in the Danish West Indies was primarily articulated as symbolic property damage, an approach to protest distinct from the waves of murder that characterized the Haitian Revolution and other revolts by enslaved people in the Caribbean.<sup>29</sup> These iconoclastic acts represented a vicarious affront to white colonial authority through the desecration of its most potent symbols.<sup>30</sup> For freedmen and freedwomen in the Danish West Indies, these events can also be seen as symbolic acts of revolutionary creation flowing from the wellspring of freedom promised by emancipation. Uprooting the whipping post, defacing the prison that was the sick

house, and desecrating the plantation signaled the inauguration of a life free from slavery's extra-judicial violence dependent on a racial hierarchy that precluded Blackness from full personhood.

In response to the ensuing chaos on St. Croix, Governor General von Scholten suffered a nervous breakdown on Thursday, July 6, abdicated control of the Danish islands, and fled to Denmark. The islands were placed under martial law by the newly arrived governor Peter Hansen, and Spanish troops summoned from Puerto Rico remained on St. Croix through November 26, 1848. On St. Thomas, movement was limited because the majority of freedmen and women simply left the plantations to find wage work in the commercial hub of Charlotte Amalie.

Despite the tumultuous social upheaval on the neighboring island of St. Croix, the young Pissarro, it appears, chose not to reflect on his proximity to the struggle for freedom in 1848 while he worked for his family's merchant business. Without textual documentation, we rely on a corpus of early sketches dominated by the figure of the laboring Black woman, a fascination apparent even in Pissarro's earliest sketches from St. Thomas. Take, for instance, the conjunction of race, gender, and labor in a drawing titled *Route de Bussy* signed "Camille Pizarro" and dated "13 avril 1852, St. T" (fig. 3).<sup>31</sup> A group of Black women stop before a copse and a walled compound that separate the sketchy beginnings of a colonial mansion

**Fig. 3** Camille Pissarro, *Route de Bussy*, 1852, pencil on paper, Ashmolean Museum

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford





from the dirt road they travel. In the foreground the tallest female figure carries a load of clothing atop her head. She cradles a child in her left arm and holds the hand of a second child at her side. She is accompanied by a woman who also bears a tied bundle of washing. Another woman carrying laundry continues along the edge of the picture plane, presaging the similar trajectory of the faceless working women and girls in the foreground. Labor and its figuration as Black and female are not explicitly captured in this drawing, as they are in other sketches by Pissarro. Rather, the young artist's graphite mark-making naturalizes the ubiquity of Black women's labor as a near nonevent. As Saidiya Hartman attests, "It has proven difficult, if not impossible, to assimilate black women's domestic labors and reproductive capacities within narratives of the black worker, slave rebellion, maroonage, or black radicalism, even as this labor was critical to the creation of value, the realization of profit and the accumulation of capital."<sup>32</sup>

*Route de Bussy* is emblematic of the formal techniques Pissarro used to constrain race and gender to the act of labor. Paper and graphite materialize a play between positive and negative space, light and shadow. They posit stark divisions between race, gender, and class that indulge a fantasized colonial order in the act of its appearance, skirting resolution in an assertion of free Black subjectivity. Delicate graphite shading indicates both vegetation and black skin, and often the two are linked in this drawing. The heavy line of a crease in the central woman's skirt also signifies the shadowy depth of the trees in front of her. The bundle of white laundry creates a negative space that echoes the lack of graphite used to sketch the verdant branches. Both black skin and shadow are imbued with a distinctly visible and material character in this drawing.<sup>33</sup> The materiality of graphite on the surface of the drawing allows dark skin and the heavily shaded bark of a tree to take on an ameliorative, fantasized equivalence. These formal techniques highlight the broader exclusion of gendered Blackness from the colonial polity, here symbolized by the walled compound and suggestion of a mansion, through the ever-present intimation of labor.

In a sketch like *Route de Bussy*, Pissarro's ambivalent fascination with laboring women of color inadvertently furnishes a lens through which to understand the unique modernity of their personhood, however circumscribed, as instigators and leaders during the protest and revolution for emancipation in the Danish West Indies. Women of color are noted throughout the archival literature as having had a central role in securing the end of slavery in 1848. In response to women's leadership in a plot to burn a plantation on St. Croix, Governor-General von Scholten recounted:

Among the black population, women play a role of great importance. They do the same work that the men do and their physical build and size render them formidable adversaries in the rough and tumble of a fight. Throughout the disturbances they were more aggressive, vengeful and altogether more violent in their passion than the men.<sup>34</sup>

While replete with the racial stereotypes used to un-gender Black women under slavery, von Scholten's comments underscore the powerful meaning ascribed to the violence and destruction enacted by women who would have been forced to work both in the fields and as domestics in the homes of plantation owners. There were recorded instances of women leaders during the revolution on St. Croix, one of whom was remembered for her "threats of murder and cutting people's heads off."<sup>35</sup> In addition, there were numerous accounts of Black women who destroyed or plundered the property of their former masters and mistresses. They severed the legs of pianos, chopped up cupboards and divans, and absconded with mattress covers when they could not remove the entire bed.<sup>36</sup> These women's acts of theft—though reclamation is perhaps more accurate—and symbolic destruction were, like the other acts of "vandalism" enacted during the protest for emancipation in the Danish West Indies, performances of freedom particularized by Black women's proximity to Creole wealth while working as domestics.<sup>37</sup> "The domestic space [of the planter's home], as much as the field," Hartman maintains, "defined [Black women's] experience of enslavement and the particular vulnerabilities of the captive body" to sexual violation in addition to bodily violence.<sup>38</sup> To wreck or claim their former masters' and mistresses' things asserted their own distance from thingliness as property, and embodied a social leveling required to upend colonial hierarchies.

Underscoring Black women's modes of emancipatory creation through revolutionary action in the Danish Caribbean elucidates the disjuncture between Black freedom and Pissarro's picturesque oeuvre. The genre of the picturesque—as a means of affirming colonial authority through stasis, aestheticization, and pacification—was ripe to assuage metropolitan and Creole anxieties surrounding the incorporation of a newly emancipated Black proletariat by conjoining a fantasy of Black femininity to scenes of productive labor. Both before and after emancipation the representational possibility of Black freedom was foreclosed by adaptations of the European picturesque to present a vision of harmonious colonial hierarchy in an idyllic tropical paradise.<sup>39</sup>



As a cosmopolitan commercial entrepôt, St. Thomas was by no means isolated from the European aesthetic tastes that proliferated throughout the mid-nineteenth-century Atlantic world. For example, the island's only newspaper, the *St. Tomæ Tidende*, stood as a barometer for colonial culture as it publicized events with an aspirational zeal and an eye transfixed by European taste imported to the Caribbean. On one occasion in the summer of 1847, the itinerant British artist and geologist James Gay Sawkins resided in Charlotte Amalie while working on a lithographic view of the city. Shortly after his arrival, the newspaper recounted a visit to his studio, concluding: "The delicacy and finish of his likenesses are in a style rarely seen in the West Indies," where there were few art academies and the



**Fig. 4** James Gay Sawkins, *St. Jago de Cuba*, c. 1859, watercolor, National Library of Australia, Rex Nan Kivell Collection

artists were mostly local amateurs.<sup>40</sup> This record of an artistic milieu on St. Thomas also evinces how the newspaper functioned as the central public organ for defining the parameters of aesthetic taste emblemized by artists like Sawkins.

In his analysis of Pissarro's Caribbean pictures, Nicholas Mirzoeff homes in on Sawkins's practice as a precedent for Pissarro, contending that the British artist had a "careful anthropological style," which appeared to "concentrate on observation rather than moral commentary."<sup>41</sup> The assertion that anthropological observation is distinct from moral commentary adds up to the position that visual representation could lay claim to a detached objectivity in the colonial Caribbean. A surviving work by Sawkins from Santiago de Cuba demonstrates the extent to which Mirzoeff's claim belies reliance on the objectivity of sight, based in the science of the Enlightenment, that promised to reify colonial authority through the denigration of Blackness as a visual-material manifestation of human insufficiency (fig. 4). In the foreground of the watercolor a number of gentlemen are dressed in white linen suits, two of whom tip their hats in greeting as a third follows a train of donkeys transporting goods. To their right, Sawkins presents a group of figures, which could be read as a Black family, who make their way along the dirt road. Their modest clothing and bare feet stand in stark contrast to the dandified white suits of the Creole gentlemen. The scene opens onto a sweeping vista of the valley and bay beyond the shallow foreground populated with barely discernible Black laborers.

Sawkins's scene conforms to the tropes of the picturesque landscape that had defined the visual construction of the Caribbean since

the eighteenth century. Because of the tension between idealization and social facticity inherent to the picturesque, the image reveals the conceit of its desired objectivity in the very act of its construction. Even in the ongoing struggle for abolition across the Atlantic world, Sawkins holds onto aesthetic genres developed to palliate the image of the tropical plantation and chattel slavery for metropolitan audiences.<sup>42</sup> It is true that the watercolor visualizes racial hierarchies that proliferated across the plantation zone with a minimum of implicit moral commentary: the white planter class acknowledges only its own kind; the status of the Black figures as enslaved or free is left ambiguous. Yet subtle visual techniques perpetuate the evacuation of possible Black subjectivities arguably inherent to the genre.<sup>43</sup> Although the foreground figures cast shadows of nearly the same length, indicating a similar position relative to recessionary space, the Black figures are notably smaller than the two Creole figures on horseback. Along with the almost imperceptible Black figures in the middle ground, it is apparent that Blackness remains a technique of staffage for Sawkins, a record of less-than-human agents in the Tropics that affirmed colonial power.

A drawing executed during Pissarro's Venezuelan period reveals the compositional and ideological affinities he may have gleaned from Sawkins (fig. 5).<sup>44</sup> The picturesque work of itinerant artists were precisely Pissarro's models when he met Frederik Georg (Fritz) Melbye—a young Danish marine painter just four years older than Pissarro—while he was sketching near the docks of Charlotte Amalie in 1852. The two artists developed a close relationship and traveled together from St. Thomas to Venezuela, arriving in the port of La Guaira on November 12, 1852. Pissarro and Melbye established a studio and worked in and around the capital of Caracas until the summer of 1854.<sup>45</sup>

In this drawing, Pissarro constructs a deftly abbreviated landscape of banana plants, palms, and hardwood trees populated by quickly rendered women of color laboring at the riverside. He includes or adapts a number of figural types developed in other drawings, including the foreground woman boiling clothes in a caldron and the group of women washing in the background.<sup>46</sup> Mirzoeff contends, "These observations were sketches for a *post-slavery imagination*, detailing the actions of those who might become either laborers or revolutionaries, such as washerwomen, coalers, and journeying traders of the town, as well as documenting the lush landscape that could provide alternative free means of subsistence."<sup>47</sup> This assertion boldly claims a work like the Venezuela sketch for the visual emergence of an emancipated Black subject.

However, Mirzoeff's claims do not encompass the full potential and contradictions of these early works on two counts. Taking the Venezuelan drawing as a point of analysis, Mirzoeff's argument elides the interwoven histories inherent to Pissarro's Caribbean oeuvre in favor of a clear-cut developmental narrative from slavery to abolition, even though he ultimately undercuts the affectively positive teleology that typically accompanies the historical shift from enslaved to free. First, Pissarro was



not presenting “sketches for a post-slavery imagination,” but constructing images freighted with a visual lexicon that still bound Blackness to slavery despite the ongoing echoes of emancipation across the region. Slavery was already abolished in the Danish West Indies when Pissarro executed his earliest known sketches from 1852. Venezuela, conversely, began the process of abolishing slavery under Simón Bolívar in solidarity with Haiti in 1815–1816. However, the institution was not fully abolished in Venezuela until March 24, 1854, during Pissarro’s time in South America. To put it otherwise, Pissarro’s drawings after 1848 do not propose a radical alternative to the picturesque; rather, they present the Caribbean as a space where the signifying power of the tropical was coextensive with the presentation of laboring Blackness (as enslaved). Second, in Mirzoeff’s reading, the potential agencies of the women depicted in these works are constrained to a single category, an “either/or” opposition that segregates labor from revolutionary action. These refutations do not invalidate Mirzoeff’s argument for the increasing acculturation of “the formerly enslaved to the disciplines of wage labor.”<sup>48</sup> Nor do they claim some radical aesthetic foresight on the part of the young artist. Rather, my reading of this work insists upon the inherent contradictions of colonial modernity, with its imbricated histories and aesthetic strategies that could not necessarily align, but nonetheless coexisted on the page. Pissarro’s corpus broadly gestures toward the tortuous and uneven path to freedom given flesh by Blackness across the Caribbean. But these are paths that never arrive in the young artist’s work; his approach to vision remained dependent upon the discrepancy between the picturesque pacification of Blackness within the landscape and its coeval aspiration to provide a counter facticity.

Unlike Sawkins’s finished watercolor, Pissarro’s graphite sketch formally discloses the artist’s ambivalence toward emancipated women’s labor. While large banana leaves are abbreviated in two quick marks, the rapidly hatched strokes that depict the foreground trees and the peaks of the mountain beyond in delicately variant shades are also used to render racial difference, a technique similar to that employed in *Route de Bussy*. This formal continuity marks the foreground figures that would otherwise be indistinguishable. The pictorial conjunction of race and landscape in Pissarro’s mark-making is reinforced compositionally. These women occupy a liminal space in the ever-deferred colonial politics of freedom. Unlike European colonial powers, Venezuela supported gradual or “free womb” abolition in the 1810s, a process by which the children of enslaved women were born free.<sup>49</sup> Working in Venezuela during the years directly preceding emancipation, the status of these Black women is indiscernible despite the fact that slavery dwindled in the nation during the first half of the nineteenth century. When abolition came to Venezuela in 1854, there were fewer than 24,000 enslaved people remaining.<sup>50</sup> This drawing offers one instantiation of the concatenation of gender, Blackness, and labor. Pissarro’s representation is predicated on this ambivalent irresolution; perhaps these women are enslaved, perhaps they represent the enslaved mothers who would nonetheless birth free citizens, or perhaps



**Fig. 5** Camille Pissarro,  
*Landscape with Female  
Figures Washing*,  
c. 1853-1854, pencil  
on paper, Ashmolean  
Museum

© Ashmolean Museum,  
University of Oxford



**Fig. 6** Artist unknown, *Camille Pissarro in Llanero Costume*, c. 1855, calotype photograph, Ashmolean Museum

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



**Fig. 7** Artist unknown, *Camille Pissarro in Llanero Costume*, c. 1855, calotype photograph, Ashmolean Museum

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

they represent the free Black proletariat. What seems clearer is that the conjunction of femininity and Blackness in the space of the Tropics makes their personhood, as opposed to legislated subjecthood, a representational site of continued subjugation at the moment of liberation.

Pissarro's early sketches evoke these gendered colonial discourses of labor while ambiguously representing work as a retrojected condition of slavery that thereby constrains the figure of the Black woman to capital. In these sketches Blackness and gender could only be represented as the fantasy of productive labor evacuated of the revolutionary catalyst that precipitated emancipation in the Danish West Indies. These conditions are also visible in a painting like *Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas*, where rest is a temporal marker bracketed by labor. Even in a painting that begins to consider class—with the differential relationship to the land signaled by the distinction between feet bare and shod—its racialized and gendered subjects were nonetheless conscripted into modes of labor still tied to slavery. Memory and fantasy are sutured together so as to become nearly indistinguishable, interleaving free Black women's revolutionary action in the Danish West Indies with the picturesque retrojection of Blackness into servitude.

■ ■ ■

To this point, the fantasy of Pissarro's Caribbean period has been largely discussed as a psychoanalytic term applied to historical, cultural, and aesthetic formations that conditioned the foreclosed appearance of emancipated Blackness. However, two photographs in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, draw out the concurrent expressions of fantasy—spanning the erotic, cultural, and political—that structured the artist's depiction of Blackness in the Caribbean (figs. 6, 7). Brought to Pissarro in Paris by his brother Alfred, these are the first known photographs of the artist.<sup>51</sup> In both photographs, a young Camille Pissarro wears loose *pantalon bombacha*, a peasant blouse cinched at the waist with a



**Fig. 8** Camille Pissarro, *Plaza Mayor de Caracas*, 1862, oil on canvas, La Casona Presidential Palace

cloth belt, a poncho, and a wide-brimmed hat—the traditional costume of a llanero, a herder and skilled horseman from the Llanos grasslands and symbol of Venezuelan national identity. The first photo presents him striking a sinuous contrapposto pose as he leans against a goad wound in rope while holding a cigar in his raised left hand. In the second, Pissarro props himself up on his right elbow as he reclines on a blanket; he holds a lasso in his right hand and gazes out of the frame, his face in profile.

Together, these staged images present Pissarro's fantasy of Venezuelan self-fashioning as it unfolded in 1853 and 1854, a fabrication that does not entirely align with the retrospective assertion of class struggle in his 1878 letter. In contrast, this identification with Venezuelan culture fulfilled Pissarro's projective wish to escape for the South American continent even after establishing himself in Europe. Distorted as these images are by Pissarro's awkward approximation of a llanero machismo and the presence of the studio in the frame, these photographs are visual and material manifestations of the fantasized ambivalence traced throughout this essay.

In one of Pissarro's last Caribbean memory paintings, executed in Paris in 1862, the artist took up the Venezuelan market in a work that enfolds the artist in an erotic fantasy of commercial exchange (fig. 8). In the foreground, two women of color recline in the shade of a makeshift fabric awning as they display a multitude of tropical fruits for sale on the Plaza Mayor in the capital of Caracas. A llanero riding a donkey looms above the two women, peering down from his elevated vantage point. This was a scene Pissarro would have known intimately because the apartment he rented with Melbye was located on the plaza and was the subject of many



sketches.<sup>52</sup> The composition presents a nuanced interplay of displaced erotic fantasy in the guise of a genre painting. Painted in thick strokes, the fruit laid out in the sun provides a focal point, a grouping that serves to justify the llanero's gaze while also implying its erotic potential by proxy. The proximity of these women of color to, and their financial reliance upon, tropical produce makes fluid the distinction between possible transactions in Pissarro's treatment of the scene. Alongside their vegetable wares, they are ostensibly on display for the masculine onlooker, although they languorously turn a head or shut eyes, a refusal of the tropical heat and perhaps their interested customer.

This intimate work from memory epitomizes the fraught ambivalence with which Pissarro fantasized a connection to Venezuelan culture vis-à-vis the desire for women of color. This fantasy was explicitly cultivated after arriving in France in 1855, as both his brushed remembrance and studio photographs attest. That is to say, it is possible to map this embodied expression of his fantasy across the Atlantic onto the painting he executed almost a decade after arriving in France. The performed masculine nonchalance of his standing portrait echoes the ease with which the llanero sidles up to the market women. The penetrating stare of his reclining portrait can be loosely transposed onto the divergent power relations of sight in *Plaza Mayor de Caracas* enacted by the pointed gaze of the llanero, and its deferral by the two women onto the fruit before them. These women's capacity to rest, or otherwise exist outside of labor, is a political assertion of Black personhood latent in Pissarro's fantasized optical access to their bodies on the Plaza Mayor. T. J. Clark has elucidated the importance of idleness to modern subjectivity in Pissarro's *Two Young Peasant Women*. "Idleness," Clark asserts, "is ultimately a political matter. Pastoral is a dream of time—of leisure sewn into exertion, snatched from it easily, threaded through the rhythms of labor and insinuating other tempos and imperatives into the working day."<sup>53</sup> In a work from the Caribbean perhaps these peasant women's "dream of time" becomes an imperial fantasy in the Tropics, and it is necessarily multiple. *Plaza Mayor de Caracas* is tinged with a material fantasy, a cultivated memory of masculine domination. Retrospectively, Pissarro contradicts his own later claims to an investment in class struggle by positioning the herdsman against a passive, blind femininity.

A preliminary drawing for the painting, titled *Young Seated Negress*, attests to Pissarro's enduring fantasy that sought to tie femininity and Blackness together through labor or its absence (fig. 9). Also executed in Paris, this charcoal and chalk sketch captures another instance of modernity's uneven temporalities when we "take their measure from the Negress," as Huey Copeland conceptualizes the Black woman's categorical double exclusion from modernity on the basis of race and gender. "Negress," as an appellation of nonhumanity first applied to enslaved women in the seventeenth century, "underlines both the recursiveness and ubiquity of Western culture's profoundest misrecognitions of the 'other,' as well as the expansive capacities of countervailing raced, sexed, and gendered performances of self."<sup>54</sup> She is depicted in profile, her hands resting on her



**Fig. 9** Camille Pissarro, *Young Seated Negress*, c. 1855–1857, charcoal and white chalk on paper, private collection

© Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images

skirt as her bare feet emerge from beneath her dress; her eyes are closed, and her head is turned away from the bright light source that emanates from the right side of the sketch and casts her shadow, animating the wall on which she rests. In this fantasized detail, as with all his Caribbean paintings in Paris, Pissarro traverses the Atlantic through his desirous representation of Black womanhood. Formally, the thick strokes of charcoal that convey the negative space of shadow and epidermal darkness imbue the drawing with an erotic sensibility that obfuscates her “performance of self” through the decision to rest. Her bare feet—attentively rendered in black charcoal and white chalk—bespeak the long history of enslaved labor upon which Pissarro relies, and they stand at the crux of this modernist colonial fantasy. The relationship between sketch, photograph, and final painting emblemizes the erotic fantasy of the Tropics that emerges from the relationship between the artist and the representation of Blackness for which freedom is held in abeyance.

As we have seen in *Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas* and *Young Seated Negress*, the relationship between women’s bare or shod feet encapsulates the concatenated articulations of Blackness that exist interstitially between rest and activity, between freedom and servitude, between legislated subjectivity and personhood beyond the state yet relegated to the island. Pissarro’s Caribbean oeuvre presents for the white European spectator an ambivalent fantasy of race in which Black women are erotic ciphers to affirm the security of colonial authority in a moment of flux.

To provide one means of concluding an investigation into the armature of colonial fantasy that undergirds modernism, it is important to note that Pissarro was not the only artist attuned to the political and potentially

erotic relationship between bare feet and race in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Charles Baudelaire's prose poem "La Belle Dorothée," published posthumously as part of the collected *Le spleen de Paris* (1867), fetishizes the foot of a free Black woman as a marker of her subjugated race and gender difference that persist despite her nominal incorporation into an imperial subjectivity after abolition.<sup>55</sup> At the start of the poem, Dorothée's Blackness is constituted by the space of the Tropics. Dorothée, "strong and proud like the sun," walks alone down a street at dawn, her presence creating "a dazzling and black spot on the light" that surrounds her.<sup>56</sup> The poet's description of Dorothée is strikingly visual—a "moving tableau" as T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting characterizes it<sup>57</sup>—that denies interiority to this woman of color, who the reader is led to presume is also a sex worker. Her waist is thin, her hips large, her breasts pointed. Only her enormous head of hair, so black it is nearly blue, gives any indication of psychology, because it gives her "a triumphant and indolent air."<sup>58</sup> The eroticized description of Dorothée's body comes to a head in the description of her foot:

And her foot, like the feet of the marble goddesses that Europe shuts away in its museums, faithfully imprints its form on the fine sand. Dorothée is so prodigiously coquettish, that the pleasure of being admired outweighs the pride of the freedwoman [*l'af-franchi*], so even though she is free, she walks without shoes.<sup>59</sup>

To colonial eyes, Dorothée's bare feet become the site of her beauty, licentious and perverse in the distance between white marble and Blackness. She is for sale, free in name only for "some young officer who, on far away shores, heard talk from his comrades of the famous Dorothée."<sup>60</sup> Sharpley-Whiting argues "Dorothée's systemic and systematic denegation has reduced her to a state of sheer mimicry, where being freed, wearing shoes, is eschewed for bare feet, which in the colonies are paradoxically a marker of racial/sexual domination—that is, slavery."<sup>61</sup>

Dorothée's nominal freedom is circumscribed by the myriad ways in which this hypothetical john may own her. Bare feet appear again when the narrator fantasizes that Dorothée would beg to go to the opera "with bare feet, like the Sunday dances."<sup>62</sup> With this naive demand, Baudelaire evokes a tradition developed under slavery to further compound the extent to which the erotic consumption of Dorothée's bare feet render her enslaved even in her freedom. Dorothée does not speak, and she is excluded from freedom through the subjugation of her Black womanhood to white male consumption. Perhaps if she did, her bare feet could have another meaning, a rejection of colonial propriety that affirms her free identity in the Tropics rather than finding new chains with which to bind her to it.

The picturesque ambivalence of Pissarro's *Two Women Chatting by the Sea, St. Thomas* opens up possibilities beyond Baudelaire's exotic eroticism and devours Dorothée beneath a linguistic sheath of denigrated Blackness. These women who fleetingly pause their work to talk, perhaps of love,

persistence, or rebellion, elicit an interrogation about Black feminine implacability drawn from Hartman: "What is the text of her insurgency and the genre of her refusal? What visions of the future world encourage her to run, or propel her flight? Or is she, as Spillers observes, a subject still awaiting her verb?" Although the two women Pissarro represented on the road to Charlotte Amalie are confined to emergent post-emancipation racial capitalism, they "are not reducible to or exhausted by it." As Hartman articulates: "These labors cannot be assimilated to the template or grid of the Black worker, but instead nourish the latent text of the fugitive."<sup>63</sup> This is not to say that Pissarro's women speak, but their formal treatment holds the various complexities of an emancipated Black proletariat together in the colonial Tropics. Even under the rubric of a modernity constituted by colonial exploitation, emancipated Black women found means of performing their personhood despite a colonized landscape pictured to render Blackness incompatible with freedom.



- 49 ANTT-IL, Processo 502, fol. 48v.
- 50 ANTT-IL, Processo 15628, fol. 2r.
- 51 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 36, and Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC, 2015). See also Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, "Introduction," in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (New York, 2016).
- 52 I am not the first to make this point; see Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 185–186.
- 53 Tania Andrade Lima, Marcos André Torres de Souza, and Glaucia Malerba Sene, "Weaving the Second Skin: Protection against Evil among the Valongo Slaves in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro," *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage* 3, no. 2 (2014): 108.
- 54 Aldair Rodrigues, "Deciphering Scarification in West Africa and Brazil During the Eighteenth Century," public lecture, Program of African Studies, Northwestern University, February 20, 2019.
- 55 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC, 2015), 42.
- 56 ANTT-IL, Correspondência Recebida de Comissários, Livro 922, fol. 378r.
- 57 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.
- 58 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 5. Emphasis in original.
- 59 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 14.

**BARE FEET, OR, THE AMBIVALENCE OF EMANCIPATION: CAMILLE PISSARRO AND THE CARIBBEAN**

C. C. MCKEE

- 1 C. C. McKee, "Cultivating Visible Order: Representations of Race and Ecology in the French Atlantic" (PhD diss., Northwestern University and l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2019). This essay draws from a chapter in my forthcoming monograph that takes a comparative and ecocritical approach to representations of Blackness and the tropical landscape from the 1848 abolition of slavery in the French and Danish Empires through the 1878 labor strike dubbed "Fireburn" on the island of St. Croix and another labor strike on Martinique in 1900. Camille Pissarro's oeuvre represents one node in a transatlantic visual cultural network and attempts to restructure the relationship between race and the environment during the rise of a post-emancipation wage economy.
- 2 Linda Nochlin, "Camille Pissarro: The Unassuming Eye," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York, 1989), 73.
- 3 T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT, 1999), 101, 122.
- 4 Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 101.
- 5 Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 6.
- 6 Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 121.
- 7 Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 122.
- 8 This provocation is informed by contemporary scholarship that reframes the overwhelmingly singular and Eurocentric vision of modernism to include a multitude of non-Western modernisms. Simon Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3 (September 2003): 455–480; Michele Greet, *Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists Between the Wars* (New Haven, CT, 2018); Samantha Noel, "Envisioning New Worlds: The 'Tropical Aesthetics' in the Art of Wifredo Lam and Aaron Douglas," *Art Journal* 77, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 76–91; and Elizabeth Harney and Ruth B. Phillips, eds., *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism* (Durham, NC, 2019).
- 9 Ludovic-Rodo Pissarro and Lionello Venturi, *Pissarro: Son art, son oeuvre* (Pissarro: His art, his oeuvre) (Paris, 1939), quoted in Joachim Pissarro and Claire Duran-Ruel Snollaerts, *Pissarro: Critical Catalogue of Paintings*, vol. 2 (New York, 2005), 49.
- 10 Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 3 (London, 1953), 299–322.
- 11 Anne Cheng's theorization of melancholia as a racialized cultural formation provides an essential precedent for this approach. See Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York, 2000).
- 12 Sarah Linger, *Peintures des lointains: La collection du Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac* (Paintings from afar: The collection of the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac) (Paris, 2018).
- 13 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (London, 1950), 28.
- 14 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London, 1973), 1002–1017.
- 15 Gunvor Simonsen, *Slave Stories: Law, Representation, and Gender in the Danish West Indies* (Aarhus, 2017), 46.
- 16 Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 14, 191.
- 17 Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, 2003), 155.
- 18 T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC, 1999), 16–31.
- 19 Spillers, *Black, White and in Color*, 155.
- 20 Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism*,

- and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde (Chicago, 1996), 224–230.
- 21 Janine Bailly-Herzberg, ed., *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1980), 123. All translations are my own.
  - 22 Neville A. T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix* (St. Augustine, Trinidad, 1994), 125, 180. Hall lists 4,077 whites and 10,317 free people of color in the Danish West Indies in 1835.
  - 23 West Indian Census 1841 and West Indian Census 1846, Chamber of Revenue, Danish Department, The Table Commission, Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen.
  - 24 West Indian Census 1841 and West Indian Census 1846.
  - 25 Richard Brettell and Karen Zukowski, *Camille Pissarro in the Caribbean 1850–1855: Drawings from the Collection at Olana* (St. Thomas, 1996), 8.
  - 26 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 209.
  - 27 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 216.
  - 28 *St. Croix Avis*, July 18, 1848.
  - 29 Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).
  - 30 Jennifer Van Horn, “‘The Dark Iconoclast’: African Americans’ Artistic Resistance in the Civil War South,” *Art Bulletin* 99, no. 4 (2017): 150. Van Horn has also emphasized the political and symbolic role of iconoclasm for American bondspeople during the Civil War: iconoclasm “emerges as a tactic that effectively sabotaged . . . a visual culture that was based on exclusion, and it did so . . . by alterations to the work of art or its context that brought the experience of the subaltern to bear on the artwork, thereby asserting the new user’s humanity.”
  - 31 Throughout the 1850s and early 1860s Pissarro frequently used variant spellings of his last name in his signature. For more information see Pissarro and Durand-Ruel Snollaerts, *Pissarro*.
  - 32 Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 167.
  - 33 Cora Michael, “‘As Much as the Light’: The Importance of Shadows in the Art of Camille Pissarro” (PhD diss., New York University, 2006), 17–20.
  - 34 Bernhard von Petersen, *En historisk Beretning om de Dansk-Vestindiske Øer St. Croix, St. Thomas og St. Jan* (Copenhagen, 1855), 117, quoted and translated in Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 225.
  - 35 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 226.
  - 36 Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 226.
  - 37 Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC, 2006), 6. I take my cue from Brooks’s emphasis on the quotidian performances and aesthetic means with which freedmen and women “imagined and stylized ways to make their subjugated bodies move more freely.”
  - 38 Hartman, “The Belly of the World,” 170.
  - 39 Krista Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham, NC, 2006), 5, 12.
  - 40 *St. Tomæ Tidende*, June 26, 1848.
  - 41 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC, 2011), 158.
  - 42 This watercolor dates to about 1859, well after emancipation in the British, Danish, and French empires, but before abolition in the Dutch territories (1863), the United States (1865), or Cuba (1886).
  - 43 Tim Barringer et al., *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (New Haven, CT, 2007), 41.
  - 44 Richard Brettell and Christopher Lloyd, *Catalogue of Drawings by Camille Pissarro in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* (Oxford, 1980), 99. Brettell and Lloyd argue that this drawing was made toward the end of Pissarro’s Venezuelan sojourn based on “the subtlety of the tonal effects,” but one cannot verify the dates of these works.
  - 45 Alfredo Boulton, *Camille Pissarro en Venezuela* (Caracas, 1966), 88–89.
  - 46 The woman cooking with a cauldron is repeated in *Studies of female figures with children by a fire* (Ashmolean Collection, verso of B&L, 15). This iteration of the Black washerwoman is a leitmotif in Pissarro’s Caribbean drawings, watercolors, and paintings (see the Ashmolean Collection, B&L, 13–16, among others).
  - 47 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 158. Emphasis mine.
  - 48 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 159.
  - 49 Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York, 2009), 190.
  - 50 John V. Lombardi, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery in Venezuela, 1820–1854* (Westport, CT, 1971).
  - 51 Ralph E. Shikes and Paula Harper, *Pissarro: His Life and Work* (New York, 1980), 56.
  - 52 Helena Scannone, *Pissarro in Venezuela: Works in Venezuelan Collections of Camille Pissarro’s Venezuelan Oeuvre (1852–1854)* (London, 1997), 24.
  - 53 Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 70.
  - 54 Huey Copeland, “In the Wake of the Negress,” in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York, 2010), 482, 484.

- 55 Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago, 1985), 115–124.
- 56 Charles Baudelaire, *Le spleen de Paris, ou les cinquante petits poèmes en prose de Charles Baudelaire* (The spleen of Paris, or the fifty little prose poems of Charles Baudelaire) (Paris, 1917), 80.
- 57 Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 68.
- 58 Baudelaire, *Le spleen de Paris*, 80–81.
- 59 Baudelaire, *Le spleen de Paris*, 81.
- 60 Baudelaire, *Le spleen de Paris*, 82.
- 61 Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 69.
- 62 Baudelaire, *Le spleen de Paris*, 82.
- 63 Hartman, “The Belly of the World,” 171.

## ON EUROPEAN MODERNISM AND BLACK BEING

SIMON GIKANDI

I would like to thank Steven Nelson and Huey Copeland for their help with the final draft of this essay.

- 1 For the centrality of Blackness in the art of early modernism, see Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New Haven, CT, 2018).
- 2 Fredric Jameson has discussed how the ideology of modernism “imposes its conceptual limitations on our aesthetic thinking and our tastes and judgments.” Fredric Jameson, “Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism,” in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986*, vol. 2, *Syntax of History* (Minneapolis, 1988), 11.
- 3 Frantz Fanon called it “L’expérience vécue du Noir.” See *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 88–114. For the English translation, see *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1967), 109–140.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York, 1961). For a discussion on modernity’s violence, see Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore, 2006), 1–19.
- 5 Judith Wilson, “Hager’s Daughters: Social History, Cultural Heritage, and Afro-US Women’s Art,” in *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists*, ed. Jontyle Theresa Robinson (New York, 1996), 95–112.
- 6 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1990), 34–35.
- 7 Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity* (Durham, NC, 2013).
- 8 The decree declares: “The Herero are no longer German subjects. They have murdered and stolen, they have cut off the ears, noses and other body-parts of wounded soldiers, now out of cowardice they no longer wish to fight. . . . Within the German borders every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle,

will be shot. I will no longer accept women and children, I will drive them back to their people or I will let them be shot at.” Quoted by Jan-Bart Gewald, “The Great General of the Kaiser,” *Botswana Notes and Records* 26, no. 1 (January 1994): 72.

- 9 I discussed these issues in “Race and the Modernist Aesthetic,” in *Writing and Race*, ed. Tim Youngs (London, 1997), 147–165, and in “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference,” *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3 (September 2003): 455–480.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), 300.
- 11 Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922–1934* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2001), 1–15.
- 12 Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford, 1998), 99.
- 13 James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art [1943]*, Moorland-Spingarn Series (Washington, DC, 1992), 58.
- 14 The terms here are borrowed from William Wordsworth’s manifesto for Romantic poetry: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” See “Preface,” in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802* (Oxford, 2013), 98.
- 15 Porter, *Modern Negro Art*, 58.
- 16 See Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (London, 1997), 26.
- 17 Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists*, 15, 16.
- 18 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity* (Durham, NC, 2004), 4.
- 19 See Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Face and Voice of Blackness,” in Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940*, ed. Christopher French (Washington, DC, 1990), xxix–xliv.
- 20 Powell, *Black Art and Culture*, 26.
- 21 Alain Locke, “The Negro as Artist,” in *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* (New York, 1979), 9.
- 22 This dilemma has been laid out clearly by Dipesh Chakrabarty writing on cultural movements in West Bengal in about the same period. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 150.
- 23 I have discussed the cultural project of Black elites in “Afro-Victorian Worlds,” in *The Victorian World*, ed. Martin Hewitt (London, 2012), 671–690.
- 24 For Kristeva, the state of the depressive is the feeling of simultaneously being absent from “other people’s meaning” and of being

Copyright © 2023 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law, and except by reviewers from the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

This volume was produced by the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts and the Office of Content Strategy, Publishing, and Branding, National Gallery of Art, Washington  
nga.gov

*Series Editor*  
Steven Nelson

*Program Assistants*  
Annie Miller  
Jen Rokoski

*Design and Production*  
Peggy Martin  
Mariah Shay  
Christina Wiginton

*Editors*  
Lisa Shea  
Magda Nakassis  
Cynthia Ware  
Emily Zoss

*Copyediting by Amy Teschner*  
*Design and layout by Jeff Wincapaw*  
*Proofreading by Tanya Heinrich*  
*Indexing by Kate Mertes*

Typeset in Whitney  
Printed on GardaPat Kiara by Friesens, Canada

Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London  
yalebooks.com/art

The Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, founded in 1979, is a research institute that fosters study of the production, use, and cultural meaning of art, artifacts, architecture, urbanism, photography, and film worldwide from prehistoric times to the present. The Center's programs include fellowships, internships, meetings, research, and publications.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022951435  
ISBN 978-0-300-26977-2

Frontispiece: Norman Lewis, *Every Atom Glows: Electrons in Luminous Vibration* (detail), 1951 (page 163)