

**diario di un
Caribe**

**THE CARIBBEAN
AS
A NICHE**

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Caribe

**“Myth is the
threshold of
history.”**

- Saidiya Hartman

**“You are in the
Caribbean, you need
to use color!”**

**- I overheard a tourist
say in Curaçao.**



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**“Are there cars
in Aruba?”**

**- an old classmate in
Costa Rica.**

**“She’s our colleague from
Curaçao.”**

“Actually, I’m from Aruba.”

“It’s the same thing, no?”

- yup, this happened to me in Holland.

Art from the Caribbean region is seen within the 'global' art market, academic circles, and the institutional discourses of 'international' art, even if to a degree unconsciously, as a niche: a subcategory or a style within the history of Art.

To be clear, 'international' and 'global' here means from a Western perspective.

When people think of art made by the experience of the Caribbean, they have a set of characteristics in mind. These characteristics often reduce the artistic production of the region to certain themes and visual language.

I'm interested in what this means for the artistic production of the Caribbean. How does this premise affect what is shown and how it is presented? I'm going to focus for now on the outside looking in: how does the outside see us and present our work? How 'they' present 'us'.

If you think about the *idea* of the 'Caribbean,' you will

see that there are many ways to see it, read it, and understand what it is. Even if we talk about it geographically it remains subjective. There's a definition of the Caribbean, including Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Colombia. Others limit the region to the islands in the Caribbean Sea.

For some of us, it's our home, where the cost of living is high, infrastructures are failing us, and where our governments are not necessarily working *for* our communities. To the rest of the world, we are an 'exotic,' 'rural,' 'colorful,' 'vibrant' region. A paradise where they come to enjoy the beach, frozen drinks, parties, and of course, the supposed 'nice weather all year around.'

If you google the word Caribbean, you will find many articles with 'things to do',

'cheap flights', 'best hotels', 'Caribbean cruises', and more information targeting potential tourists.

The relationship between the Caribbean region and tourism, which feels like an intrinsic relationship, is tied to the fact that tourism is the main economic pillar for a large part of the territory. This relationship is presented as a symbiotic one, where progress and stability are guaranteed every time a tourist gets off a plane or cruise ship.

In reality, we are talking about a system with the same characteristics as the colonial infrastructure that we are supposedly leaving behind. Tourism reinforces the power imbalance between the Caribbean region and the West (North America, Europe, Australia).

You can read extensively on how tourism is a mechanism of extraction and how it promotes the colonial legacy in publications such as ***Culture and Imperialism*** (1993) by Edward W. Said and ***An Eye for the Tropics*** (2007) by Krista A. Thompson.

Much of the knowledge about us, and much of which we've even internalized, is based on observations by white explorers in colonial times, where they just put their 'interpretations' of our customs and traditions on paper but have little to no base in social sciences or similar fields.

Knowledge has been institutionalized and managed for centuries in and by the West and it mostly does not consider our experiences, perspectives, ideas, or arguments.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues in her book ***Decolonizing Methodologies*** (1999), they

"desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce" (1)

but they deny us the right to participate in the definition of our own culture and our nations.

(1) p. 19-20.

The problem is that this is not something we can say was left behind in colonial times. It's an internalized structure, still used and accepted, because this narrative is continuously presented, in different ways. In his text *Snap Judgements* (2006), art curator Okwui Enwezor speaks about the impact that representation has on public perception.

Enwezor uses the example of Africa, looking at how the predominant narrative of poverty, scarcity, and suffering was born and how this remains the perception we have of the continent.

He explains that this stereotype

"often has as its basis the belief that nothing good happens in Africa;

that its people have nothing of value to contribute to the advancement of humanity." (2)

And this affects how everything related to Africa is evaluated each time. With a touch of inferiority. Especially its culture and art.

So what does all this have to do with Caribbean art and how we present it?

The predominant narrative of the region is an important filter that affects how the global art sector—the institutions, professionals, and the most influential structures—relates to us. These are the entities that make us a category with the broad label of 'Caribbean Art.'

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For starters, when the term Caribbean is used as an adjective, it simplifies our identity by implying that we are the same. This idea is entirely flawed. We share historical, social, and cultural elements, but how these are expressed in each island or country within the region is diverse.

We need to be more proactive in the way we relate to our representation. There is currently a movement within artistic circles promoting more critical and curious attitudes, to question our structures, definitions, and ideologies.

When we apply this to how we talk, think, and engage with our culture and artistic production, we begin to free ourselves from

expectations that pigeonhole us into a niche.

Let's learn to recognize when a narrative is being imposed on us. Is it a dialogue with us, or just a Western discourse about us? We need to be critical and avoid contributing to the minimization of our experiences to merely the supporting cast.

WHY WOULD WE
WANT TO SEE THE
COLONIAL ENTITY AS
THE MAIN CHARACTER
IN OUR HISTORY?