Bending Bone China: Juana Valdes' Politics of the Skin

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Abstract: Juana Valdes is an Afro Cuban-American artist whose contributions to visual arts offer a severe critique on contemporary politics of race, gender, and mobility. While she is most notably known for her ceramic sailboats shown in galleries all over the world, her most recent works on bone china examine her place within Caribbean diasporic and American racial politics. In this article I will examine how these installation works continue not only a conversation on race, gender, and politics, but also concern themselves with aging and cultural memory. One piece in particular, La botaron como un trapo viejo, presents rag like ceramic pieces in various skin tones and textures. Another example, the as of yet untitled piece also on bone china that reads a variation of the phrase, It's about hanging by a nail by the thread by the skin of your teeth, echoes the multiplicity of interpretation in Trinidadian artist, Christopher Cozier's Tropical Night series while the black and white lettering simultaneously points to a haunted space within the American imaginary very similar to Kara Walker's race-based historical fantasies. This article will serve as an occasion to present Juana Valdes' most recent works as shedding light on the re-production of gender and racial ideologies which speak to a pan-Caribbean, transcultural moment all the while countering the newly minted "post-racial" American myth.

Keywords: Cuba, Culture, Valdes, Bone china, Race

Juana Valdes is an Afro-Cuban artist whose contributions to visual arts offer a severe critique on the contemporary politics of race, gender, and mobility. Valdes has participated in exhibitions such as the Paul Sharpe Contemporary Art's *Juana Valdes: A Survey 1994-2004* (2006), *Multiplicity: Contemporary Ceramic Sculpture* (2007-2008) and *From Taboo to Icon: Africanist Turnabout* (2008). She has also showcased her work in El Museo del Barrio, Whitebox Gallery, and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art among other alternative spaces. She is most notably known for her sailboats in porcelain in *The Journey Within* (2003), which was showcased in galleries in New York, Oregon, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, among others; the installation's versatility can connote a relaxing activity with one boat or an invading presence with a multitude of boats that critiques inequitable political migrations.

Her most recent works on bone china, which are discussed in this article, observe her place within Caribbean diasporic and American racial politics. This article examines how through these installations she claims belonging within Caribbean, Latino, and American identities all the while critiquing how historical and contemporary structures continue to name the person of color as second class and the woman of color as doubly marginalized. I place Valdes' works in conversation with works by Trinidadian artist, Christopher Cozier, and African American artist, Kara Walker because all three prioritize how cultural memory is a dynamic negotiation. All three artists question politics that is in the business of delivering a polarizing narrative, especially regarding minority subjects. Ultimately,

they reveal how the past, present, and future are brought together simultaneously when contemplating history through the contemporaniety of art. According to the preface of *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, "*one of the most striking features of contemporaneity is the coexistence of very distinct senses of time, of what it is to exist now, to be in place, and to act, in relation to imagined histories and possible futures*" (Smith, Enwezor and Condee, 2008, xv). Through *Colored China Rags I* I juxtapose Valdes' preoccupations of beauty and race through a playful Cuban context with slavery discourse examined in Caribbean and African American cultural production like literature and visual arts. When moving to *In No Abstract Terms* and *Orator* I expand my examination in order to shed light on how Valdes speaks against the unreadability of blackness. Finally, *Hanging By* brings the conversation full circle as the message returns to skin, the sociality of race, and its damning effects still present today.

On May 25th, 2013, I spent time with Valdes in her space at the Fountainhead Studio in Miami's Wynwood area. The 25,000 square-foot space founded by Kathryn and Dan Mikesell accommodates 35 artist studios (Tschida 2013). Valdes took me around the various installations in progress; all the works were produced the year prior. Despite variations in context and content, all projects are installation pieces completed in bone china, making me think of Marshall McLuhan's famous 1967 phrase, "*The medium is the massage*"; massage being a typo for message which McLuhan decided to keep (2001, 10). Although McLuhan was pointing to the advent of television and the encroaching information age, Valdes' commitment to medium and its mutability re-inscribes the relationship among race, gender, and visual arts. I read her works as boldly demanding the audience to stake claim of our collective pasts—slavery, racism, hate—in order to promote multiple futures beyond present day discriminations that continue to subjugate.

Valdes' use of bone china is her initial cultural and historical gesture. When manipulating the material Valdes is bringing forth its history of trade, migration, and pre-modern notions of globalization. A brief history is as follows: according to Hilkat Erkalfa, "*Production of bone china is similar to traditional porcelain production. But it requires a sensitive control in the preparation of its raw materials and production steps because it has a lower plasticity and a narrower vitrification range*" (qtd in Ozgundogdu 2005, 29). As the most translucent and fragile porcelain, bone china's composition, made up of bone ash, feldspar, and kaolin, was developed in 1794 in England by Josiah Spode II (Ozgundogdu 2005, 29). The approximately 45-50% of bone ash in the composition allows for the white and semi-transparent properties: "*Bone ash is usually obtained from cattle bones which have a lower iron content. Bone flour is produced by separating the gelatin content after scalding the bones in a suitable solvent and cleaning them from their flesh and oil coverage*" (Ozgundogdu 2005, 30). Wanting to compete with the Chinese porcelain market, the English porcelain makers of the eighteenth century read Jesuit missionary Père d'Entrecolles' letters. He was the first to bring to the Occident detailed secrets of the manufacture of Chinese porcelain. According to William Burton, one myth for the introduction of bone-ash into the English porcelain paste could be from the English porcelain makers misunderstanding of Entrecolles' letters. In one of his letters, he recounts an encounter with a Chinese merchant, stating "*A rich merchant told me that once the English or Dutch bought some Pe-tun-tse which they sent to their own country to make into porcelain; they, however,*

took no kao-lin and so their experiment failed. The Chinese merchant laughed in telling me this, and said, 'They wanted to have a body with no bones to sustain the flesh'" (Burton 1906, 19). While bone-ash was used in experimental stages of porcelain around the world, the English were the first to use the material as a staple ingredient. Porcelain's history, thus, encompasses centuries of unmatched trade in scale and volume between China and other parts of the world such as India, Egypt, Iraq, Persia, and Spain: "*[…] by the eighteenth century, porcelain yields the earliest and most extensive physical evidence of sustained cultural encounter on a worldwide scale […]"* (Finlay 2010, 6).

Valdes' use of this raw medium recalls the history between the East and the West but also its fragility. According to Ozgundogdu, bone china has become a "*special genre in the art of ceramics although its use is not common because of the technical difficulties associated with its use*" (2005, 30). Part of its aesthetic qualities is the whiteness of the material; therefore, "*colour applications are generally avoided in artistic bone china applications because it is mostly preferred to emphasise its pure whiteness*" (Ozgundogdu 2005, 30). This trend is precisely what Valdes revolutionizes, as she pushes beyond the initial materiality of bone china and forces it to embody a color, an identity, a politic.

The first installation I observed would become *Colored China Rags I* (fig. 1) which is a series of rag looking pieces of colored bone china nailed alongside one another. This series was completed at the European Ceramic Work Center in Holland during Valdes' residency with Sundaymorning@ekwc. Valdes first receives the bone china in liquid slips. Without disclosing too many details, Valdes explained that she "*found a way*" to color the china and then use a fabric to shape it. Once shaped, she fires each individual piece. In my interview with Valdes (2013), she explained that the idea behind the project is "*to simulate skin, to simulate leather [while] at the same time […] talk[ing] about skin tone*." The experience as one moves from one rag to another is one of plurality. The tones vary from an alabaster both in color and texture to a rougher few at the end of the spectrum which are darker toned. The spectrum encompasses a representation of skin that is both fresh and fair to skin that is deteriorated in the darker rags.

Fig. 1. Juana Valdes, Colored China Rags I (La botaron como un trapo viejo), 2012, porcelain Bone China fired 1234°C, 13 x 8 x 4 in., The Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida Collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

The couple times I met with Valdes revealed a modest artist. Even when creating something that pushes beyond not only her own creative boundaries but also those of ceramics like *Colored China Rags I,* she is humbled and eternally optimistic stating, "*I am excited about it because I think I have come up with a process that no one has done before […] so not even the coloring of the bone china is exceptional but also the ability to shape it and do this is quite unique*" (personal interview 2013). When I visited Valdes' studio, I saw the empties for *Colored China Rags I* which she initially named, *La botaron como un trapo viejo*. In preparation for her show, Part 008: In The Fo*ld* at SENSEI

Exchange Series @ "The Cellar" of Little Fox Cafe, New York, the gallery requested she revise the Spanish title. Since the English translation loses its cultural significance, she opted for a more broad title which became *Colored China Rags I*. However, for my purposes I will use both titles since the former working title in Spanish captures her cultural commentary.

Colored China Rags I (*La botaron como un trapo viejo*) gestures towards a much needed conversation between past and present conceptions on age and gender, labor and race, and cultural memory and race. The Spanish phrase itself is a colloquial *Cubanism* which means that a woman has been tossed aside like an old rag. A "trapo" is generally an old piece of cloth already discarded from its original function and then used in various forms to clean or to dust furniture. To be called a "trapo" is to fundamentally separate an individual from their subjectivity, and to name a woman a "trapo" is to negate a woman's subjecthood by affirming her gender inequity. Since the phrase, "La botaron como un trapo viejo," uses "trapo" to insult a woman, it calls into play her age, and therefore, her lack of sexual currency within the patriarchal hierarchy. It is also interesting to note that since in Spanish the nouns assume a gendered ending, both "trapo" (rag) and "viejo" (old) have masculine endings, it eradicates the feminine introduced with the article "la" beginning the phrase.

Further, a particularly interesting critical layer to Valdes' installation is that in the reference book, the *Diccionario de Cubanismos más usuales*, "trapo" is also linked to a hierarchy of the skin when spoken in conjunction with "toalla" (towel). According to José Sánchez-Boudy, the phrase "*A cualquier trapo le dicen toalla*" (They call any rag a towel; my translation) means "*A cualquier le dan méritos que no tiene*" (They give undeserving accolades to whomever; my translation) (1978, 195). While this definition alone is about undeserved value, when looking up "toalla" (towel) the dictionary asks one to look up both "piel" (skin) and "trapo" (rag), placing the notion of value and merit now on the skin (Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 192). Under "piel" (skin), there is the phrase "*Tener piel de toalla Telva*" (To have skin like a soft towel; my translation) meaning "*Tener la piel suave*" (To have soft skin; my translation) (Sánchez-Boudy 1978, 159). While equating a woman to a tossed out rag reveals her gendered expiration date within a patriarchal society, Cuban colloquial phrases place the rag in opposition to the towel which adds yet another level of ostracism. If one is a black or brown skinned woman, the societal critique is two-fold. (fig. 2)

Fig. 2. Juana Valdes, Colored China Rags I (La botaron como un trapo viejo), Detail, 2012, porcelain Bone China fired 1234°C, 13 x 8 x 4 in., The Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida Collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

Valdes' installation aptly depicts the societal inequities embedded in seemingly playful and harmless rhetoric. After gazing upon the installation through a gendered and cultural lens which the title instantly demands, the rags in various hues and textures depict a differentiation of class and labor. When thinking through the historical relationship between labor and race and even cultural memory, there is an anxious anticipation of confronting the past and the future. Observers must sit with Valdes' object, as they are not only bearing witness to an installation occupying the space, but also a moment

capturing a lived experience that, I argue, traces through the Atlantic slave trade to present racial and cultural stigmas within a gendered perspective.

The act of putting the rags in a line from lightest to darkest sheds light on the historical and contemporary value placed on race. This installation reminds me of British-Guyanese writer, Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), which recounts the infamous and horrific incident aboard the slave ship, the *Zong*, where 131 slaves were thrown overboard alive in order for the captain and crew to collect the insurance and to claim a profit. In one scene, D'Aguiar has the slaves contemplating their situation, and they believe that when they arrive at auction, they will "*trade all of them in their markets as meat […] with African bones ground to powder and used, like elephant tusks, for its sexual potency or ability to purge the blood, and black, soft, durable skin for clothes and shoes, belts and gloves*" (D'Aguiar 2000, 37). When Valdes discussed this piece she stated that historically human bone was blended into bone china. The irony behind the myth is that slave labor in the Caribbean has colloquially been termed as "farming the bones" because of the decimating conditions of cane labor. This phrase is aptly the title of Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998). Ultimately, *Colored China Rags I* demands an immediate reception and then paused contemplation for not only the labor required for the installation to be, but also the versatility of critique available with such a piece. The piece castigates the lack of affect and corporeal singularity echoed in the myth of human bone in the china and the slaves' belief of their bodies becoming the "*clothes and shoes, belts and gloves*" for their owners.

As seen in Figure 1, the current version of the installation gradually moves from lighter to darker tones in a line. If this line would fold into itself and the fairest rag would meet the darkest rag or the piece remains in a line but the lightest and darkest would be coupled on the left and the medium tones would all be clumped on the right of the spectrum the conversation drastically alters. This scene now becomes a moment to critique how difference is regulated and how traces of our history are emulated in contemporary society. In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, feminist theorist, Sara Ahmed, urges us to think through the ethics of touch and to

> complicate what it means to be "with", such that "with-ness" is a site, not of shared co-habitance, but of differentiation (= sociality as differentiation). In other words, in the inter-bodily movements that allow bodies to be formed (as well as de-formed), *bodies are touched by some bodies differently from other bodies*. Not only could we ask the question, "which bodies are touched by which bodies? ", but we could also ask about the different ways in which bodies "touch" other bodies, and how those differences are ways of forming the bodies of others. (2000, 48)

Coupling Ahmed's theory with Valdes' piece touches on the colonial and sexual histories of touch that have constructed spaces of vulnerability and unrestrained violence for othered bodies evidenced in *Feeding the Ghosts*, for instance. However, the idea of "with-ness," "*not of shared co-habitance, but of differentiation*" also speaks to the culture of unknowability that remains today in order to maintain subjugation within social and economic spaces, especially of blackness in the U.S.

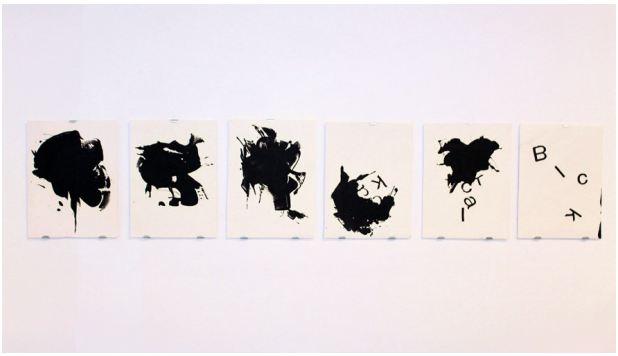

Fig. 3. Juana Valdes, In No Abstract Terms, 2012, porcelain Bone China fired 1234°C, 12 x 60 in., Collection of Amy and Michael Kornik. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 4. Juana Valdes, Orator (Obama tile), 2012, porcelain Bone China fired 1234°C, 20 x 12 in., Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

The next two installations, *In No Abstract Terms* (fig. 3) and *Orator* (fig. 4), depict blackness as unreadable in contemporary popular political culture. The first, *In No Abstract Terms* is a series of white tiles with the word "black" as inlay cast in bone china while the second, *Orator* is a series of President Barack Obama's shaded figure inlayed into bone china tiles.

Valdes began thinking through the concept for *In No Abstract Terms* at the European Ceramic Work Center in Den Bosch, Netherlands back in 2002, yet didn't begin to execute the piece until 2013. Inspired by the *I AM A MAN* posters during the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers protest, Valdes sought to capture the abstract essence of this civil rights scene in a fluid visual. Similarly, to the *Colored China Rags I* (*Trapo viejo)* installation, Valdes' strong formal background is meeting a conceptual line of thinking that allows her to play with abstraction. In addition, like the *I AM A MAN* posters (search image 0022_000062_000203_0000 on *http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=vvz*), this installation engages with a kinetic discourse that explores perception along with absence. The tragic irony behind a man having to carry a sign reading that very message is felt in the variations of the tile where at first the term "black" is unreadable or incomplete as just a number of seemingly random letters erratically invade the first white tile. The next couple tiles are a combination of a black inkblot smudge with the word, "lack" or "crak" on the tile. It is not until one moves to the final tile that the word "black" is visible, making the tiles all need one another in order to read the commentary of black as both being a lack within society while simultaneously falling into the cracks of sociality.

The piece moves from a verbal, guttural imagery and works itself towards or back to language with the words "lack," "crak," and ultimately "black." When asked about the piece, Valdes stated that as an Afro Cuban-American, her personal relationship with language is one of tension. Valdes argues that

> my [her] use of language is very much in conversation with globalization and colonization, since colonization specifically brings language […] so when it brings language along, it is used to

> modernize the culture, but it is also used to enslave the culture […] I am referring to how language can be used in that way. How it can free you but also hold you captive. (Personal interview 2013)

She acknowledges that Spanish is her mother tongue due to the colonial history of her native Cuba; however, having immigrated to the United States at the age of seven and becoming fluent in English while at the same time comfortable within Spanglish marks her as having to be within a limiting Latino framework which at times forecloses Afro-Cuban/ Afro-Latino identities.

I read the *In No Abstract Terms* series in conjunction with *Orator* because both speak to what it means to inhabit a space society fixes upon the self and then to live in the constraints of such an in-between space. This photo installation not only engages with contemporary depiction(s) of the 44th U.S. President but simultaneously envisions his future representations within the present imaginary. As a hyper-visible and incredibly scrutinized public figure, President Obama is consistently measured about his political persona and the attention race should assume when constructing his identity. In fact, he speaks candidly about this topic in his book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006, 355). Valdes visually captures President Obama's desire to remain accessible; in most of the photographs, he is either waving with an open-hand or pointing to the sky. Also, he is captured in a suit or with his sleeves rolled up, employing a professional who can also practice a blue-collar friendly role. It is important to note that I restrict my analysis of the President to his public identity and not investigate his politics since his public self is already politicized on both sides of the aisle. Also, defending or admonishing his political record is not Valdes' project.

What strikes me about Valdes' *Orator* is that it is not a detailed picture, but rather a silhouette of President Obama in black or grey against a white background. Just his shape seems to be an iconic emblem of contemporary politics that will be printed onto the American psyche for generations to come. Most of the images are of Obama's back, so the audience is looking onto this image while he is looking out into the contemporary moment. The more time and politics pass the farther these two visions become – his and ours as the audience. In addition, the shaded silhouette presents an open signifier where the viewer can inject their perceptions of the President. This apropos representation is the very dubious space Obama seems to operate where, despite his now second term in office, opponents of the President cast him with an air of unknowability. Thus, I connect this to the "lack"/"crak" tiles of the previous installation.

One striking case of depicting the President as someone "we don't really know" is the now infamous Clint Eastwood speech to an invisible Obama/chair at the 2012 Republican National Convention. Amidst Eastwood's blithering inaccuracies like the 23 million unemployed which the Department of Labor at the time estimated closer to 12.8 million Americans, was the line he repeatedly used "*I can't do that to myself!*" The phrase suggested he "*go f*** himself*," but on a more detrimental point, it painted a spectral black president as the stereotypical angry black man (Abdullah 2012). However, it's safe to say Dirty Harry nor the crowd roaring with laughter consider themselves racist.

On February 4th, 2008 Peter J. Boyer stated in *The New Yorker* that Obama and Cory Booker are both "*breakthrough figures—African-American politicians whose appeal transcends race*." Their conciliatory approach to politics cast them as proponents "*for a post-racial politics [which] is a powerful force, and rewards those who seem to carry its promise*" (Boyer 2008). Two days later, Tim Rutten wrote in *The Los Angeles Times* that President Obama's imminent success was due to a "*post-racial, post-ethnic brand of politics*" (Rutten 2008). If Obama's presidency has ushered in a new age of post-race in America, then we have become a country where racism exists but nobody is a racist. In his book, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness: What it Means to be Black Now (2011)*, Touré argues the pitfalls of the post-racial along with his arguments for the term Post-Black stating,

> […] we are in a post-Black era, which means simply that the definitions and boundaries of Blackness are expanding in forty million directions—or really, into infinity. It does not mean we are leaving Blackness behind, it means we're leaving behind the vision of Blackness as something narrowly definable and we're embracing every conception of Blackness as legitimate. Let me be clear: Post-Black does not mean "post-racial". Post-racial posits that race does not exist or that we're somehow beyond race and suggests colorblindness: It's a bankrupt concept that reflects a naïve understanding of race in America […] (2011, 12)

The idea of a post-racial America seems temporally adjudicated; it suggests a pre, during, and post racism that allows for society to no longer have to overtly confront race as a social and political issue. Valdes' installation of President Obama's black silhouette against a stark white background presents the need for more conversation on race not less. I also find it striking that Valdes made it a point to let me know that she noticed Obama hardly ever closes his fist which could remind the American public of the Black Panther Movement or the 1968 Olympics scene in Mexico City where African-American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos (gold medal and bronze medal winners respectively) saluted in act of protest during the American national anthem. Her preoccupation with representing President Obama's blackness as different than these two formative moments in American history and Eastwood's comedic routine which places the President in a stereotypical box (or chair rather) supports the need for Touré's concept of Post-Blackness in order to assess legitimacy of representation not identity.

In addition, the stark meeting between the white background and the black silhouette reminds me of Kara Walker's historical fantasies (see images on *http://learn.walkerart.org/karawalker/Main/RepresentingRace*). On a larger scale, Walker imagines a Pre-Civil War antebellum South with similar black silhouettes against a white background. Her website states that

> Walker does not represent a necessarily truthful depiction of history. Fact, fiction, and fantasy are intertwined; exaggerated truths and fictionalized events parade as history lessons that viewers must unpack, sort out, and ultimately decide which elements are true […] The artist is also commenting on the way that official history, particularly that of African Americans, is just

as constructed as her stories. (http://learn.walkerart.org/karawalker/Main/HistoryCollusionOfFactAndFiction)

I am intrigued to think of what will become of President Obama's legacy, how will history treat him and how will Valdes' audience decipher the truth(s) reflecting from her installation now and the day of tomorrow? His legacy will undoubtedly occupy a space among fact, fiction, and myth. Similar to Walker's works his enduring truth will be debated, will need unpacking. And the question of whose truth will persist is depicted in the Obama photographs since they can be positioned as a mirror reflecting the audience's own prejudice and "non-racist" racial concerns.

Fig. 5 and 6. Juana Valdes, Hanging By, 2012, screen-print on porcelain Bone China fired 1234°C, 12 x 9 in., Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.

The final piece, *Hanging By* (fig. 5 and 6), continues Valdes' preoccupations with iconic readability. This piece, also on bone china with the text screen printed, is a series of paper-thin large postcards. Each read a variation of the phrase, "It's about hanging by a nail by the thread by the skin of your teeth." A condensed version of the phrase appears in both the King James Bible and the American Standard Version in Job 19:20 as, "*My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth*." As the audience engages with the piece, one notices that the phrase is rearranged on each tile, sometimes deleting certain words but never adding any new words. The installation eventually ends with the final tiles reading, "hanging by your skin" and "it's about hanging." There is a sense of cyclicality in these works. When seen together, this message articulates what the first piece, *Colored China Rags I* (*La botaron como un trapo viejo*) visually conjectures.

Further, the installation's versatility echoes Trinidadian artist, Christopher Cozier's *Tropical Nights* series which is a set of postcards on paper with a combination of tropical scenes and embedded text (see images on http://tropicalnight.blogspot.com/). Both pieces begin with conventional, borderline stereotypical, messages—Valdes' use of a biblical reference which usually means to barely get away from something and Cozier's use of the utopic tropical Caribbean scene. Valdes and Cozier's installations subsequently disrupt and reconstruct historical pasts so as to inhabit a new space of uncomfortability.

Historically, postcards were paramount in constructing the Caribbean as a tropical and escapist space. In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, postcards assumed an indelible position as travelling advertisement for personal adventures as well as a colonial propaganda to promote tourist activity in the region. In *An Eye for the Tropics* (2006), Krista Thompson tracks the tenuous position of the postcard, as she argues that the postcard was a medium of consumption and appropriation. She states, "*Before 1902, when the senders could not write messages on the back of the postcard, they literally scrawled their comments across the entire face of the pictorial image on the postcard, obstructing or*

becoming a part of the photographic representation […] The message marked […] his or her appropriation of the exotic and foreign into narratives of the self" (Thompson 2006, 258). Cozier's work can be regarded as a contemporary revision to the colonial tourist writing across an image and subsequently possessing its representation. By including text as part of their art, they contextualize and potentially direct the critical responses to their art.

A number of drawings in Cozier's *Tropical Night* series, which he began showcasing in 2006, have phrases and captions embedded or alongside the image which subvert the very image presented to create an altogether different visual experience. One striking example is Cozier's juxtaposition of iconic tropical images such as the palm tree with captions detailing the violence and suffering endured by Trinidadian society. According to Thompson, "*[…] by sprinkling the tropical icons with contemporary news headlines Cozier compelled viewers to reevaluate Caribbean people's relationship to the landscape*" (2006, 292). Cozier forces his audience to coalesce experiences and realities that would otherwise be compartmentalized. Not only does he deconstruct the long-standing perpetuation of the Caribbean as a tropical vacuum, by invoking a journalistic tone within his captions, he also demands his viewers to take in the drawing as a visual performance occurring in the immediate present.

Similarly to Valdes' piece, Cozier's *Tropical Night* also requires viewers to react on multiple semantic and visual registers. If presented as a stack of papers "*piled up, face down*" the drawings "*look like a piece of minimalist sculpture, a cuboid with ridged edges stained with brown ink*" (Laughlin 2007, 8). In *Working Notes: On Christopher Cozier's Tropical Night Drawings* Nicholas Laughlin records his on-going interactions with Cozier as he is privy to the artist's work in progress. He confesses that each new drawing shifts the previous narrative established: "*I thought I'd put a story together, but now there are fresh meanders in the stream of consciousness*" (Laughlin 2007, 8). When Valdes was showing her *Hanging By* tiles, she showed them to me first as a series of tiles nailed together on the wall, resembling a legal pad one can peel a page off and a new message appears. She then showed me a picture of another iteration of the piece which she showcases as a series of tiles side by side similar to the *In No Abstract Terms* tiles. I find the former more compelling as the audience is brought into the performance, constructing the evolving message on the spot.

Ultimately, the evocative nature of Cozier's and Valdes' pieces is their relevance across national and geographic spaces. In *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora* (2006), diaspora is defined as an active engagement with global flows; it is a manner in which to consider and subsequently represent oneself within not only national spaces but also within international communities: "*Diaspora is not deployed as an identity but as a way of conceiving the world […] diasporic sensibilities make links but do not rub out locality and specificity*" (Hudson/Walcott/Kenzie 2006, 14). Both Cozier and Valdes observe the balance between the unitary project of diaspora as well as their particularity as individuals engaging with and representing a specific historical past and present. While Cozier seeks to depict local, Trinidadian experiences that lend themselves to critique the singular representation of the Caribbean as paradise, Valdes manipulates the medium of bone china to speak against the unreadability of blackness.

Valdes' pieces allow the audience to interrogate racism and gender discrimination through an Afro-Cuban American context. Despite particularity, however, her work lends itself to universal concerns regarding marginalization and historical memory. While *Bending bone china*, Valdes asks us to re-dress the body as a political canvas where notions of belonging, subjugation, and justice have been historically negotiated. The most prevalent themes I read in Valdes' installations delve into the notion of the woman of color as a site of contested beauty and autonomy as well as the unreadability of blackness especially in an American context. Ultimately, her work alongside artists, Cozier and Walker, and writers, D'Aguiar and Danticat, speak to the necessity of bridging our dialogue across disciplines. While McLuhan argues that "the medium is the message", by assessing various mediums we can observe a generational concern regarding historical and contemporary issues fomenting.

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