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in conversation

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What might it mean to “bring back” the mask and sculptural tradition to the Afro-Surinamese practice of Winti? And, what kind of labor would be involved in such practices of recovery? Did Winti already have a sculptural tradition at the moment of its emergence in Suriname, or does this desire for the sculptural mark out a new moment, and new invention, in the tenure of the practice’s existence? How might we read such forms of recovery, such acts of recuperation within the present, especially within present-day Dutch society, as opposed to Suriname where Winti originated? And what might it mean, within the complex questions surrounding race and the politics of belonging within the postcolonial present in the Netherlands that it is an artist that we would identify as white who was invited by the Winti priestess, or one could say, by the ancestors, to help to recover Winti’s sculptural past?

These were some of the questions that immediately emerged for me when I was asked to be part of this conversation. For,

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what may seem to be a simple act of (re-)invention falls not just within the complex field of questions around the politics of heritage or the invention of tradition, but more nearly for my responses here within questions of the legacies of the colonial past in the postcolonial present. In this short response I want to train my thoughts in this direction. I am interested to tease out some of the lines of overlap between this desire for recovery and broader issues in Caribbean thought. Also, I am interested to highlight some of the tensions presented by such forms of recovery. My observations here are in no way definitive, as, unfortunately, I was not sufficiently close to this project beforehand to know its intricacies, nor am I schooled in the Winti tradition. I will rather try to suggest some preliminary ideas towards thinking about questions of recovery and the imagination within a transnational Caribbean context.

Bringing Back the Tradition— Caribbean Thought and the Act of Recuperation

The question of cultural recovery which Marian Markelo (Nana Efu Mensah), priestess of the Afro-Surinamese Winti religion in the Netherlands, raises with the instruction from the ancestors to “bring back” the mask, the sculptural tradition of Winti, and which these two authors that I respond to here trace, are not new to Afro-Caribbean thought. Indeed, one could see it as coinciding with older attempts to find theoretical models to comprehend Caribbean cultural identity and traditions after colonial violence. Ever since the 1970s there have been attempts at developing theoretical models for understanding the Caribbean, whether the Creole society proposed by Brathwaite (1970, 1971), the plural society model of Smith (1974), Beckford’s plantation society (1972) or later works of scholars such as Chevannes

(1995, 2006), Warner-Lewis (2006), and Thompson (1984) which have circulated around poles of cultural retention of Africa on the one hand, and new world creation or a creolization model on the other. The “African retentions” model was invested in the ways that old world cultural forms survived the trans-Atlantic crossing and re-awakened in the new world, while creolization models foreground more the adaptation and re-invention of African cultural forms in the Americas—for the creolization model new cultural forms were to emerge. I have commented elsewhere that such “either/or” distinctions may not be productive (Modest 2011).

But whether we choose one model or the other may not be so relevant here; the message received by priestess Markelo from the ancestors raises questions about the ritual traditions of black populations in the new world and the place of African practices within such traditions. It asks questions about the ways that Caribbean peoples materially construct their lifeworlds around unremembered pasts as a consequence of the erasure and loss caused by the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

In my own curatorial work, I too have grappled with similar questions around African sculptural traditions in the new world. In two exhibitions that I curated in the 2000s on Jamaican furniture from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, I too was interested to try and understand not only the specific conditions of Caribbean life under colonialism that led to particular stylistic patterns or motifs on furniture and the flows of these designs between metropole and colony, but I was also interested to see the extent to which the richness of West and Central African sculptural traditions brought to the new world under slavery could be seen in the extant furniture. Of course my inquiry was not inspired by a message from the ancestors—or at least not as far as I was aware—but emerged out of a broader interest in the ways in which objects as archival sources could be seen to evidence traces of African craft traditions

in the new world. Because, even if we are to question as speculative the tracing of the genealogy of those Africans brought to the new world as enslaved to specific tribal groups—Bakongo, Yoruba, Ashanti for example—it is without doubt that many of those who came were from rich sculptural traditions with exceptional material culture. It is this same material culture that now populates the display halls and storage depot of many museums across Europe and America, the same museum objects, and in this case objects from the Africa Museum in Berg en Dal, the Netherlands, on which this conversation around the Kabra mask is based. Yet my own search was to produce little in terms of material evidence, even if we could make some claims about retained styles or motifs. Rather, my own efforts shifted away from any “authentic” cultural retention and its material evidence, moving towards thinking about the “corpus of sensibilities,” as Guyanese thinker Harris (1970) puts it, which would make it necessary and possible for Caribbean peoples to use the traces of the past to fashion new cultural forms within the new conditions under which they were now living. The Caribbean and the cultures of the Caribbean were, then, generative in their own right. It left me questioning the need for recuperation as a mode of thinking about Caribbean cultural forms. As I came to see it, this fashioning of Caribbean cultural forms was to emerge out of Harris’s so called “phantom limb”—that limbo imagination which when “thrown back” into the past pulls on the multiple traces of the past to reassemble anew liveable cultural presents and futures for Caribbean peoples.

It is in this limbo imagination that I see priestess Marian Markelo’s attempts to recover the mask and sculptural tradition. I do not here make light of the ancestral instructions that she may have received. That is not my point. Rather, I am more interested in the process through which desire for such sculptural pasts took form. Such limbo imagination, on my account

anyway, seems a necessary act in the fashioning of postcolonial identities for those who are descendants from the formerly enslaved, descended from those for whom the material archives that we have inherited in the present, especially in our museums, are full of gaps, of histories not written, of silences. It is in such acts of recuperation that historical loss can be remembered where the archive of the imagination is important to fill the gaps in traditional archives. It is no wonder, then, that priestess Markelo was to find an artist to help with this recovery, with the act of imagination.

Recuperation, the Religious Transnational and the Politics of Belonging

Yet, to speak of recovery and recuperation without marking out the specific context within which this act of recovery is taking place would be to elide some of the cogent issues that this project raises. For this is not happening in the Caribbean, but rather in the Netherlands, albeit including Caribbean practitioners within the Dutch context. It is in the transnational Caribbean that such recovery is taking shape. From my own research, interest Winti could be compared with similar Afro-Jamaican religious or philosophical traditions such as Revival or Rastafari that have become part of a trans-national Caribbean. Adherents for Revival, for example, which is a religious practice that emerged in Jamaica in 1860/61 that mixes traditional Christian and African religious traditions, can be found in the UK, Canada, and the USA, all major destinations for Jamaican migrants immediately before and after the island's independence from Britain in 1962. These religious practitioners are held together by networks formed around specific key figures such as leaders of a (transnational) flock (in the religious sense) or by a set of key events and practices that bring them together in different locations each year. It is not uncommon,

for example, for a leader to have followers in different places such as London and Kingston or Kingston and Toronto. Priestess Markelo's charge, then, from the Netherlands, a country where many people of Surinamese heritage moved both before and after Suriname gained independence from the Netherlands in 1975, cannot therefore be taken as strange. But it remains to be asked what the conditions of being in the Netherlands mean for how Winti is practiced today and how it changes over time. In her text, curator Annemarie de Wildt questions whether the mask could best be placed within an ethnographic museum—one could say the obvious collecting intuition for non-Western religious practices—or within the Amsterdam museum—a museum dedicated to the history of the city and its inhabitants. The mask's creation within the Netherlands and performance in Amsterdam at a ceremony to mark the 150th anniversary of emancipation in the Dutch kingdom, would suggest it as having a home within the city museum. We could even go further to ask whether Suriname, a country that emerged out of Western colonial formation, can be regarded as non-Western in any sense. Whatever else, we have to ask whether such an object can be described as non-Western, seeing that its creators (artist and priestess) are both Dutch, even if within recent political discussions the right to belong to the Netherlands for those people regarded as non-white has been brought into question (Modest 2014).

Whose Recuperation: Does Racialized Belonging Still Matter?

It is exactly with this politics of belonging that I want to raise my final point. For within the tense discussion in the Netherlands recently around race, heritage and the politics of belonging, it cannot go unremarked that the ancestors' beckoning would lead the priestess to find a white artist to

participate in such acts of recovery. I will not dwell on this here, as my intention is not to preclude the possibility of such an occurrence. Yet it remains curious for me that both of the authors at whom this response is aimed would leave this unmentioned. While both Suriname and the Netherlands have shared similar imaginations as spaces of tolerance, and inclusion, where racial relations are not important, such imaginations have come under serious criticism in recent years. What might we take then from this collaboration between black priestess and white artist? Might it suggest a post-colonial moment in the Netherlands where such racialized positionalities are unimportant? If I were to take recent discussions within the Netherlands at face value then my answer would be a resounding “No.” I will not claim to have an adequate answer to this; what I will propose, however, is that perhaps it opens up the possibility for new forms of coalition where claims to the colonial past and indeed the structuring of Dutch heritage in the present and for the future is a project that must be imagined by all—a coalition beyond the skin as a category of difference. But if this is to occur it might be necessary for us to name our position in such acts of recovery and not leave it unnamed as part of assumptions about an easy postcolonial present.

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