



Courtesy of the artist, Isolated Labs.

How To Be Seen While Unseen: Finding the Un-visible Bahamas in the (Dis)assembled Works of Tavares Strachan

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Abstract

The work of Bahamian-born Manhattan-based artist Tavares Strachan poses poignant questions about opacity, fragmentation, and assemblage as they relate to the invisibility of Caribbean artists and the un-visibility of the Caribbean, even in plain view. By applying a Caribbean theoretical interpretation to his body of work, and in particular the New York installation Tavares Strachan: seen/unseen, this article explores the challenges of rasamblaj for Caribbean art and artists. Drawing hints from otherwise isolated pieces that resist being grouped as Caribbean, it seeks to connect Strachan's work to Caribbean diaspora art histories and artists such as Norman Lewis and Jean-Michel Basquiat; to circum-Caribbean vernacular cultures, musical circulation, and Afro-futurism; and to Caribbean philosophies including Edouard Glissant's 'aesthetics of opacity' and 'parallactics', Wilson Harris's 'non-linear

simultaneous movement', Kamau Brathwaite's 'tidalectics', and Patrick Chamoiseau's 'intro-retro-active imaginary'. All of these fragments are assembled into a new way of seeing unseen elements in Strachan's body of work, which give new insights into the problematic of when, where, and by whom the Caribbean is assembled.

Caribbean art retrospectives always wrestle with the question of Caribbean identity because of the invisibility of the Caribbean in art history and the so called "art world." In a critical overview of the changing positioning and practice of African Diasporic art, art historian Krista Thompson proposes that "considerations of the art object in the African diaspora may ultimately necessitate an exploration of the 'aesthetics of opacity', to use the term of the Martinican Edouard Glissant, that which is not easily revealed, made visible, transparently present" (Thompson 2011, 19-20). In the 1990s, she argues, art history of the African Diaspora shifted away from an anthropological focus on "African retentions" towards more complex processes of transatlantic circulation and transculturation. The Caribbean presence within the "African diaspora" is overdetermined by histories of the colonial plantation and fraught with erasures. A new generation of art historians and artists "of the African diaspora had to be attentive to the invisible and un-visible (that which is not seen while in plain view), as well as cognizant of that which remained in the realm of the visible" (ibid, 20).

The notion of "un-visibility" emerges as a key concept in Thompson's new book *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (2015). She borrows the term from Ralph Ellison's introduction to the 1981 edition of his celebrated novel *Invisible Man*, in which he describes blacks in the United States "as so hypervisible that they have been rendered *un-visible*" (Thompson 2015, 39-40). What does it mean for an identity to be invisible and for artworks to be un-visible? How can someone or something hide in plain view? And how do these questions relate to the call for assembling, gathering, joining and enjoining posed by this special issue on *Rasanblaj*? In this essay I want to explore the relation between the seen and unseen in the work of one Caribbean artist, informed in part by Thompson's meditations on "the production of representational disappearance" and "performing the state of un-visibility" (ibid, 41).

There has been a recent spate of Caribbean arts exhibitions curated outside the region and seeking to assemble artists as Caribbean. These include the major survey "Caribbean: Crossroads of the World" with more than 500 works shown at El Museo del Barrio, the Studio Museum of Harlem, and Queens Art Museum in New York from June 2012 to January 2013; "Rockstone & Bootheel: Contemporary West Indian Art," curated by Yona Backer and Kristina Newman-Scott for Real Artways in Hartford, CT, in 2010; and before that "The Global Caribbean: Focus on the Caribbean Contemporary Art Landscape", curated by Edouard Duval Carrié at The Little Haiti Cultural Art Center in Miami in 2009. But any such regional art surveys raise thorny questions about inclusion and exclusion, marginality and centrality, identification and disidentification. Curators must question "the presumed subordination of postcolonial societies to the Western world" even as they "aim to challenge and complicate the ideas of the

Eurocentric art field" (Backer and Newman-Scott 2010, 8-9).

This suggests the need to think very carefully about how practices of assembling, enlisting, compiling, or regrouping Caribbean artists might make a group visible to a wider public, yet ignore their efforts to not be made *hypervisible*. And what about those less obvious instances where Caribbean artists seek to hide that identity "while in plain view"? Who is assembled, how they are named, what identities they represent, are all matters of political, personal, and cultural contention, in which various kinds of masking and opacity might be involved, as well as partial transparency.

In this essay I want to open a space for considering the work of Bahamian-born Manhattan-based artist Tavares Strachan as a function of this more complicated understanding of Caribbean diaspora un-visibility and transparency/transigency. Strachan's recent project "Tavares Strachan: seen/unseen" explores these themes very explicitly through its un-visibility (appearing only on a website and exhibition catalogue, after the fact, where it is described as being "closed to the public at an undisclosed location" as part of "the artists's overall practice of positioning works so that some of their aspects are visible while others remain conceptual"). I myself played a small role in this project, yet never saw its installation despite being invited to write an essay about the elusive work, which led to this article.¹

Seen/unseen builds on Strachan's earlier work "Orthostatic Tolerance," a series of inter-related installations documenting the activities of the (non-existent) Bahamian Aerospace and Sea Exploration Center (BASEC).² Strachan refuses to make themes of Caribbean identity³ central to his work in any conventional or obvious ways, but it is nonetheless present. Indeed he explicitly resists being positioned as a "Caribbean artist" or an "African diaspora" artist, which has opened up a different kind of (international, cosmopolitan) space for his work.⁴ He was nevertheless chosen as the first artist to "represent" the Bahamas in the 55th International Venice Biennale in 2013,⁵ and I want to argue that even if he does not position himself as a Caribbean artist, a reading of his installations grounded in Caribbean history, literature, and theory offers a very productive means of interpretation in relation to the problematic of Caribbean *Rasanblaj*.

Bahamian Fragments Reassembled

In his early work Strachan explored natural elements grounded in the human experience of the Bahamian environment, including light, heat, chalk, cloud, water and salt residues. These media are presented as at once elemental and technical, natural and chemical, found-in-nature yet scientifically man-made. They are universal, yet also particular to this place. In many cases he ingeniously transports elements from one geographical location to another, such as 24 hours of Bahamian light reproduced in a room lit by a lightbox in Providence, Rhode Island; a cube of Caribbean heat conjured on top of a plinth in a chilly room in New York (*I Can't Forget What I've Forgotten*, 2006); cloud formations temporarily produced and captured in an

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array of small glass orbs (*Glo-Our Rain Maker*, 2006); and, most spectacularly, an Arctic ice "specimen" transported by Fed-Ex to a solar-powered refrigerated tank in the Bahamas, and to a sidewalk in Brooklyn (*The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want*, 2006), and reproduced for the undisclosed "seen/unseen" installation. Yet none of the explanatory texts nor critical reviews that accompanied his early work captures the nuances of a postcolonial Bahamian perspective on the (in/un)visibility of the Caribbean in science, technology, art, and modernity. Strachan's work both invites yet resists being grouped with other Caribbean art — it isolates itself, while playing with methods of "assemblage" that call into question singular identity and defined territoriality.

While Strachan's hermetically sealed glass encasements might remind one of the work of Damien Hirst, they also might reference the Wardian Cases that were used by Victorian botanists to collect tropical specimens for shipment back to research sites like Kew Gardens in London. Caribbean nature, we are reminded, is one of the founts of modern science. Art critics have interpreted some of Strachan's work in relation to land art such as Robert Smithson's and to universal themes of science and the environment, yet it also points more specifically towards the "denaturalized" and "renaturalized" nature of the Caribbean as it has been imagined, invented, transported, and consumed in the North, yet reclaimed and reinvented in the Caribbean and its diasporas (Sheller 2003). From his Bahamian perspective on earthly elements and outer space, Strachan's work subtly indexes the long history of planetary exploration that unknowingly cleaved the world into two hemispheres (when Christopher Columbus first sighted land in the Bahamas in October of 1492, leading the way to the "New World")—with cleaving meaning both a splitting apart and a joining together.

Later the Bahamas was the location for the development of early under-water viewing technologies, and collection of its corals formed the material basis of natural history museums throughout North America (Thompson 2006, 192). Recent research makes claims that in the "blue holes" of Abaco and Andros islands, "Clues to how life evolved, not only on this planet but also possibly on alien worlds, might be found in underwater caves in the Bahamas."⁶ Andros is also the site of a controversial US naval base due to its access to one of the deepest water channels in the region. Thus the seas around the Bahamas mix together stories of natural origins and advanced visualization technology, remnants of the deepest planetary past and material for the envisioning of earthly futures within a changing climate. The Bahamas embody a strangely techno-scientific nature, which Strachan's work replicates.

Strachan seems to point toward these exploratory antecedents — a hidden history of advanced scientific practice located in the deep waters of the Bahamas—with his representation of one of the greatest yet least known African-American explorers: Arctic explorer Matthew Alexander Henson who accompanied the Peary expedition in 1910. In Strachan's fragmented collage of the explorer he appears almost like an astronaut, with his fur hood thrown back to look like the neck of a space suit, suggestive of the encased movement of the body through extreme conditions.



Fig.1. Tavares Strachan, *Henson*, 2011. Collage, Mylar on Plexiglas. 60 x 26 inches. Courtesy of the Artist, Isolated Labs.

The flying fragmentation of this image, its gathering of pieces (another kind of *rasanblaj*), is repeated in many other works that depict broken pieces of glass reconstructed, a fragmented space suit or a shattered rocket. There is an unresolved tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, reminiscent of the cartography of the Bahamas with its scattering of island fragments: Grand Bahama (not far from Miami), Little Abaco and Great Abaco, Eleuthera and New Providence, Andros and Exuma, and many more reaching all the way to Great Inagua in the South (close to Eastern Cuba and northern Haiti).

This scattered geography invites a re-assembling of the nation, and ties into the idea of the Bahamian as a seafarer and an explorer of new territories. It also reminds us of Antonio Benitez-Rojo's idea in *The Repeating Island* (1996) that the plantation experience was the "big bang of the Caribbean universe" whose "slow explosion throughout modern history threw out billions and billions of cultural fragments in all directions." As glossed by Wendy Knepper "these fragments continue to be pulled apart and come together in an ongoing, destabilized process of creolization and cultural creativity" (Knepper 2008, 158). The Bahamas are in a constant state of *rasanblaj*.

Such Caribbean creativity has long been grounded in the exploration of "roots and routes," (DeLoughrey 2007) including an awareness of intra-Caribbean migrations (such as between Haiti and the Bahamas) and the circulation of vernacular cultures within the "trans-Caribbean," (Henke and Magister 2008) as well as concerns with how such circulations intersect with other high culture and mass mobilities of tourism, musical cultures, and the arts (Puri 2003; Rommen and Neely 2014). Such cultural travels exceed the boundaries of the Caribbean sea,

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over-spilling the entire globe. In earlier work Strachan casts himself as an intrepid explorer of the Arctic, like Hensen, planting his Caribbean style aquamarine flag in the snowy wilderness (see Fig. 2).



Fig 2. Tavares Strachan, *Who Deserves Aquamarine, Black, and Gold, (FLAG)*, 2005-06. Flag: cotton, linen. Lightbox, print. 27 x 33 inches. Courtesy of the Artist, Isolated Labs.

Here a claim to territory (and national identity) is in tension with the pull outward to explore the distant reaches of the world, to leave home, and to move between incompatible climatic zones: a perennial Caribbean dilemma. To what ends of the earth will the Caribbean explore, or explode?

The title of another early work "It Might Not Be Such a Bad Idea If I Never Went Home" seems to reference the national motto of the Bahamas: Come Back Home. When the Bahamas moved towards independence in 1973, the phrase "Come Back Home" became "a rallying cry for the young nation, and home came increasingly to be configured as located in the past" in a rediscovery of the local rural music and culture of the outer "Family Islands" and going "Back to the Bush" (Rommen 2014, 1999). Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rommen describes the centripetal and centrifugal forces of Bahamian mobility and musical translations that navigate between the cosmopolitan "center" of Nassau (influenced by North American and Caribbean musical styles) and the rural outer island "periphery" (influenced by local "rake-n-scrape" style) as a form of "time travel." Yet Rommen (2011) also shows how Nassau itself was a site of multiple mobilities, with musicians and other migrants from Jamaica, Haiti, and Cuba coming there to play the clubs, turning it into what I have elsewhere called a "place to play/place in play" (Sheller and Urry 2004).

Strachan's work also presents a kind of time travel and mobile place-making, suspended between a past home rooted in the essence of the Bahamas and some kind of universal cosmopolitanism. The explorer/astronaut/artist is trying to get home, yet at risk of dispersal in works such as "Finding My Way Home": a fractured white space suit for an invisible spaceman floating over the *seen/unseen* installation (Fig. 3).



Fig 3. Tavares Strachan, *Finding my Way Home #2*, 2010. Cast Resin and steel, 72 x 96 x 120 inches. Courtesy of the Artist, Isolated Labs.

Strachan's titles take note of the impossibilities of ever going home and the difficulties of transmitting matter from one state to another.⁷ And the name of his studio, "Isolated Labs," signals a certain distance from the world, as does exhibition titles like "Orthostatic Tolerance." What are the physical tolerances of matter itself, and fragile human bodies, when exiting and then re-entering home? Once displaced from one's native medium or climate, does not time travel become an impossible project of suspension: where and how can re-assembly take place?

Caribbean Space Age as Afro-futurist Rasanblaj

Strachan's 2009 show at the ICA in Philadelphia documented the BASEC launch of a sugar-fueled glass rocket over a Bahamian reef. The rocket's glass is made from island sand, and the rocket fuel from island-grown sugar cane, representing the transformation of "basic" Caribbean natural substances into "advanced" scientific technologies. While raising a smile with its mock insignia, cosmonaut training, and video of a beach-side launch that ends in a broken rocket, this project nevertheless addresses poignant themes of the Caribbean's relation to modernity, science, technology, and art.

A black man appears at the rocket launch clad in a full-body white bio-hazard suit, as if

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prepared to encounter alien worlds. He is accompanied by two policemen-like figures wearing white pith helmets, erstwhile symbols of British colonial rule that were appropriated into Caribbean nation-building as signs of order, civility and traffic management. The experimental drive of BASEC embraces and appropriates modern science and images of (colonial) modernity, while keeping its feet grounded in elemental realities of the sandy shores of the Bahamian sea. The project reminds us that while the Caribbean usually appears as an afterthought in the history of science and technology, it significantly haunts the footnotes of the Space Age.⁸

Strachan's work explores the limit points between elements of air and liquid, visibility and invisibility, disappearing histories and imminent futures. The Grand Arts project shown in Kansas City includes video of Cosmonaut training that Strachan undertook at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Star City, Russia.⁹ This involved a space capsule half-submerged in an indoor swimming pool, and video footage of the artist donning a space suit and entering the water like a Scuba diver in practice. He is plucked dripping out of the water, much like Gus Grissom being rescued from the Bahamian seas in 1961, as portrayed in the film "The Right Stuff" (dir. Philip Kaufman, 1983). Central to the show is "a life-size blown glass diver submerged in a 1700-pound tank filled with 5 tons of mineral oil. Transparent yet distorted, dense yet hollow, the figure appears to float via the illusion of light and material." As the text explains, the title Orthostatic Tolerance refers to the stress endured by astronauts and deep-sea divers alike upon exiting and then re-entering the breathable atmosphere of our planet. Testing himself through exertion of body and mind, Strachan's interest lies in the exploration of boundaries, the limits of human possibility and the experience of being a displaced member of a society where issues such as science, history and modern imperialism converge.¹⁰

The exploration of transparent glass objects submerged in mineral oil inside glass cases raises questions about the limits of the visible, testing the thin line between different states of matter. Yet it also might be referencing the invisibility of the Caribbean islands, being "in but not of the West," as C.L.R. James put it, as well as the unseen displacements of the Caribbean diaspora suspended within larger African diaspora flows.

All of these sea and space explorations seem to be in dialogue with the marginalized lineage of Afro-futurism, as noted by curator Stamatina Gregory in the accompanying ICA exhibition "Pathways to the Unknown: Sun Ra, El Saturn and Chicago's Afro-Futurist Underground 1954-68." In some ways Strachan's para-fictional BASEC echoes real connections of the Caribbean to the Space Age (from the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 to Ian Fleming writing the James Bond stories at Goldeneye, Jamaica) but also references its imagined place in the poetic-cosmic visions of Afro-futurism. Erik Davis describes Afro-futurism as "an often ignored strain of New World African culture: a techno-visionary tradition that looks as much toward science-fiction futurism as toward magical African roots." He continues, "This loosely gnostic strain of Afro-diasporic science fiction emerges from the improvised confrontation between

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modern technology and the prophetic imagination, a confrontation rooted in the alienated conditions of black life in the New World." Strachan is not the first artist to bring a Caribbean perspective to scientific technofuturism (nor to the specific theme of space exploration),¹¹ yet he engages only obliquely with this cultural assemblage, leaving his exact connection to such Caribbean and African diaspora critical traditions quite opaque (or perhaps masked, only available to the knowledgeable insider).

Cultural Critic Mark Dery first suggested that "African-American culture is Afrofuturist at its heart [...] With trickster elan, it retrofits, refunctions, and willfully misuses the technocommodities and science fictions generated by a dominant culture that has always been not only white but a wielder, as well, of instrumental technologies."¹² Associated especially with Sun Ra and his Omniverse Arkestra in Philadelphia, in the Caribbean a particular strain of Afro-futurism encompasses the seminal dub reggae and electronic experimentation of Lee Scratch Perry's Black Ark Studio; hits like Max Romeo's 1973 "Chase the Devil" (which envisioned chasing Satan out of Earth and sending him to "outer space"); and the influence of Jamaican sound systems on electronic music and hip-hop like Afrika Bambaataa & the Soul Sonic Force's "Planet Rock" (Tommy Boy, 1982), all of which involved appropriations and repurposing of technology, or what Chamoiseau called the "intro-retro-active imaginary" (Knepper 2008).¹³ These genealogies hint at the strange trajectories of circum-Caribbean vernacular cultures, and the peculiar positioning of the Bahamas (and Nassau in particular) on the cusp between cultural influences emanating from Jamaica, Haiti, Cuba and the United States, as Timothy Rommen suggests in *Funky Nassau* (Rommen 2011).

We might still wonder which imaginaries get included and excluded in such Afro-futurist vernacular cultures. As Jacqui Alexander poignantly reminds us, "not just any body can be a body" in the Bahamas and elsewhere in the Caribbean, and certainly the gender dimensions of both the scientific-technoculture and the high art world that Strachan taps into remain highly masculinist (Alexander 2005; and see Sheller 2012). In *seen/unseen* there is one piece that pays homage to Brooklyn-born artist Jean-Michel Basquiat — whose father came from Haiti, and mother was Afro-Puerto Rican — with three Basquiat-style works on paper arrayed in front of school desks made from Bahamian chalk (see Figure 4). The arrangement suggests that Basquiat's (in some ways) Afro-futurist work, may have been a significant influence on Strachan, but we must leave it to our imaginations to understand precisely what this means.



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Tavares Strachan, *Basquiat Channels (large)*, 2010. Acrylic, oilstick, charcoal, pencil and watercolor on handmade paper, three pieces. Three panels 120 x 84 inches ea. Courtesy of the Artist, Isolated Labs.

Did Basquiat's career influence Strachan before or after he got to art school in the United States? Is he thinking about the huge significance of Haitian migrants in the Bahamas or Puerto Ricans in New York? Or simply about how Caribbean artists travel into the New York art world? A Brooklyn Art Museum retrospective notes that "Basquiat's focus on black people extended to include his interest in Afro-Caribbean culture and his concern with the representation of Africans and African Americans in popular entertainment and in American history."¹⁴ Strachan's references to African American explorers, astronauts, and Basquiat himself seem to point toward a similar mission of representational *rasanblaj*.

Yet as Kellie Jones and Marc Mayer argue, Basquiat's work (like Strachan's) has a "calculated incoherence" that resists interpretation such that there is always something "lost in translation" (Jones 2005). This takes us back to Glissant's "aesthetics of opacity" and Thompson's emphasis on the un-visibility in African diaspora aesthetics. Strachan's Caribbean or Bahamian identity is itself seen and unseen in his body of work, visible yet invisible depending on the angle of the viewer. The refusal of hypervisibility opens up the question as to whether this opacity, or play upon in/visibility, is a strategy for Caribbean art to travel, opening up new trajectories into the world. Perhaps the surreptitious staging of Strachan's undisclosed exhibition, combined with its flashy launch party and published catalogue, also signals other forms of "shine", "dazzle", or "spectacle" (Thompson 2015) within Caribbean and African diaspora aesthetic practice.

Non-linear simultaneous movement: parallaxics

The reception of Strachan's work is complicated by its location, his location, and the receiver's location. American art critics who note the Caribbean and postcolonial strains in Strachan's work still seem to offer overly-simplistic interpretations:

The Bahamas Aerospace and Sea Exploration Center in the rocket video is Strachan's seemingly half-serious, half-joking proposal to improve his native Bahamas. His playing astronaut points to the lack of black faces among the space-exploration ranks and perhaps nudges us toward an acknowledgment of national differences in wealth and achievement, and how they're knotted up in legacies of race and colonization. (Cook 2010)

Is this simply about astronauts with "black faces" or "differences in wealth and achievement"? Is BASEC meant to "improve" the Bahamas through inclusion in achievement or make up for its

lack of "wealth and achievement"? These seem like rather condescending interpretations, and miss the more serious intent behind the half-joke.

Rather, I would argue that in facing towards an exploratory Caribbean future with "basic" tools, BASEC optimistically performs what Guyanese poet, novelist, essayist and dramatist Wilson Harris describes as "breaking fixed linear ruling patterns into non-linear simultaneous movement of such patterns forwards and backwards. Such simultaneity brings us into the mystery of timelessness and helps the past to be re-creatively potent" (Harris 2009, 26). Harris himself does this by referencing alchemy, native cosmogonies, quantum physics, hypotheses on time and space, dreams, and aboriginal cultures and religions, all elements likewise to be found in Strachan's work, even if sub-consciously deep inside its genesis. Intimations of the ancestral, the spiritual, and the quantum press into this vehemently sanitized, isolated, and sterile scientific world.

Strachan's scientific and geolocational interests, refracted through the Bahamas, are uncannily reminiscent of the writing of Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, who subtitled his poem "Guanahani" (the indigenous name for some of the Bahamian islands), "flying over the Bahamas 12 Oct 1492 on AJ 016 over the US Easter [sic] Seaboard of Gauguin" (Brathwaite 2005, 7). Referencing the painter Paul Gauguin's post-impressionist island primitivism, telescoping past and present, and superimposing various parts of the planet and their distinctive geographies, the poem is narrated as if looking down at Earth from a spacecraft:

(1)

How come

along the East Coast of North America
almost to noon . the thin white line of the long beach

the clouds coming right down on the water like ice-floes
like thousands of tiny floating islands in an orange [sic] tint of water
*what makes me say **Soufriere** at the beginning of the world*

[...]

(3)

What makes me call out Sahara

as we turn slowly between heaven
and this dead earth of flat contours
not even an eagle or a hawk . arrow of the air
nothing living until we reach
the Bahamas where it will be light
blue & green . w/the face of the dream
looking up towards us like leaves . like Icarus

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Brathwaite, like Strachan, deals with elements and geographies in motion and goes on to refer to "the ice-floes drifting over the Arctic's infidelity" and the "clouds soon crowding again/strato-cumulus of beginning of the moon from 39,000 feet of the spacecraft." In this dislocated time-space he becomes a "witness" to the "outer wheels/& limits of spiral galaxies triangeles [sic] parachutes. shapes of magenta/stealth bombers ghosts shrouds/Tibetan journeying spaces of time between magnets & continents/causeways into another continuum. approaching the new life of Eleuthera."¹⁵

Brathwaite projects the Bahamas backwards in time and forwards into the Space Age, producing a kind of Afro-futurism that is materialized in Strachan's extra-temporal space/sea explorations and assemblage of fragments like so many earthly islands, continents, or even planets. Poised between the onomatopoeia of Bahama/Sahara, Eleuthera appears from outer space as a kind of semi-colon between old and new worlds, a curved line of sand in the warm sea.

We can read this New World Afro-futurist vision in relation to Martinican theorist Edouard Glissant's *The Poetics of Relation* (*La Poétique de la Relation*) and *Caribbean Discourse* (*Le Discours Antillais*) in which he develops a Caribbean theorization of mimesis, "transversality," and "parallactics," all ideas meant to suggest forms of relationality between two places produced through "that intricate doubling that informs postcolonial culture" (Glissant 1997, 1992; and see De la Campa 1994). Each of Strachan's works creates a double of something in another time and place (e.g., "The Problem of One Thing Existing Simultaneously", 2006), supported by thermal and chemical technologies that serve to underline both the fragility and the resiliency of human existence, but also its indeterminacy. Glissant's translator J. Michael Dash has traced nineteenth-century antecedents of an anti-nationalist and anti-essentialist Caribbean philosophy, for example in the work of Haitian writers Emile Nau and Antenor Firmin, who (like Strachan) seem "to want to destabilize narrow ideas of national identity thereby anticipating the kind of relational thought of an Edouard Glissant or the deterritorialized imagination of a Dany Laferriere." Dash himself says that like the great Haitian anthropologist Michel Rolph Trouillot, "I felt you needed detour and distance [to] fully grasp what you thought you had already understood at home" (Dash 2012). How, for example, does a Bahamian migrant on the island of Manhattan think about Haitian migrants who now live in the Bahamas: who (re)assembles, via what detours, to constitute what we call "the Caribbean", or "the Bahamas", or "the Americas"?

Caribbean philosophy asks us to consider the challenges of re-assembly and re-grouping (i.e., *rasanblaj*) in contexts of dispersal and fragmentation: how do Caribbean subjects (or anyone for that matter) piece themselves back together, materially and spiritually, when inhabiting places in constant motion and spatial separation? Above all, Strachan's work engages the viewer's curiosity, senses, and sense of wonder, while simultaneously evoking an anxiety of isolation and loss of contact with others—the feelings of exile, being marooned, or landing on the moon. Those who view his work will come away with very different perceptions,

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depending on their located perspectives in time, space, and embodied experience. Works like "Portal from Where We Are is Always Miles Away" (2005–06), which transported a slice of sidewalk, earth, parking meter, parking sign, cold air and debris from New Haven, Connecticut, to a hermetically sealed installation in California, might be read as a purely US "American" commentary. Yet, from a Caribbean perspective, it deals with common themes of temporary or split dwelling places, residency without the permanence of citizenship, crossing through portals and borders controlled by governing regimes, and how to bring a little bit of home with you wherever you are to produce "translocal ecologies" (Tolia-Kelly 2008).

Strachan's work can be placed in relation to earlier "cosmopolitan modernisms," as Kobena Mercer describes an approach to art history that recognizes the longstanding cross-cultural dynamics between African, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America in communication with European modernism, modernity, and modernization (Mercer 2005). Just as Caribbean writers have often thematized the migratory and transnational patterns of life that connect them to more than one location, many Caribbean artists also live as transmigrants, negotiating the relation between the Caribbean and Euroamerican modernity, becoming what might be described following Srinivas Aravamudan as "tropicopolitans" (Aravamudan 1999).

In particular the generation of Surrealists like Wifredo Lam, Agustín Cardenas, and Jorge Camacho of Cuba, all of whom lived in Paris in the 1950s, and Ivan Tovar of the Dominican Republic and Hervé Télémaque of Haiti, who moved there in the 1960s, brought surrealism into communication with the Caribbean as "a point of convergence and interaction" through which to explore the "relation between different cultural realities" (Richardson 2005, 74, 80). They too were interested in the complex dialectical relation between the primitive and the modern in generating what Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) called "alter-Native modernities." These are themes addressed in other ways by contemporary Black British artists like Yinka Shonibare and Chris Ofili, and at institutions like Rivington Place and inIVA in London. Themes of the sea, ships, islands and migration are also made far more explicit in conventional ways in work by other contemporary Bahamian artists, as well as by other artists across the Caribbean region (Thompson 2003).

Finally, we might also compare the Bermuda-born abstract expressionist Norman Lewis, who lived in Harlem where, influenced by friends such as the writers Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, he explored "invisible presence" in works such as "Every Atom Glows: Electrons in Luminous Vibration" (1951), said to be a response to the atomic bomb, and in a series of black paintings of atmospheres and landscapes obscured by darkness or fog, "when it was nearly impossible to see" (Gibson 2005). Ann Gibson suggests that "In its ability to obscure structure, as well as differences of colour and tone, fog is related to Ralph Ellison's trope of invisibility; but whereas invisible things are not seen at all, objects in fog are selectively obscured—some aspects show, others do not, and some appear, but with a difference" (ibid, 113). The same role seems to be played in Strachan's work

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Components for an Absolute Symbiosis (2006), in which a transparent blown-glass model of the human circulatory system is suspended in a 300-gallon transparent tank of mineral oil; light passes through it such that the form can only be seen in partiality from different perspectives in the room, a technique he has reprised with his *Orthostatic Tolerance* piece at Grand Arts, another glass-enclosed island of air hovering in invisible liquid.

Other works by Strachan explore the relation between visibility and invisibility, light and dark, transparency and opacity, liquid and solid. Though very different in style from Lewis's work, this still calls to mind Ellison's invisible man, hiding in his underground room ablaze with electric light bulbs: "I am an invisible man. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison 1995 [1952]). However, in Strachan's case, it is both the human figure and the surrounding environments themselves that precariously emerge and recede in his framings of (in)visibility and human being-in-the-world. How can physical presences be invisible, and to whom are they un-visible? Are Caribbean subjects suspended in another dimension, e.g. "in diaspora" once removed from home, and how can they be reassembled? This is the challenge of *Caribbean Rasanblaj*.

Conclusion

It is important to contextualize the work of Tavares Strachan within these mobile Caribbean cosmopolitan and Black Atlantic diasporic lineages, if only to approach the canons of art history and art criticism through a transversal relation that recognizes the divergences of the temporalities of modernity and modernism in decentered locations. A parallax move toward Caribbean philosophy, art traditions, and literature as aids in the interpretation of Strachan's work is not meant to reduce or limit its boundaries, but rather to highlight the expansiveness and universality of the Caribbean exploration of time, space, freedom and being.

Strachan describes the creation of a single line as an act of simultaneous creation and destruction, bringing something into being even as it divides space and cancels out other possibilities.¹⁶ The fine line between sea and sky, solid and liquid, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, universal and particular, material and spiritual, is the fraught line upon which we assemble life on Earth. *Rasanblaj* is the urgent call to remind ourselves of the un-visible ever-presence of this fine line between life and death.

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Notes

¹ The project "Tavares Strachan: seen/unseen" is documented at seenunseen.com, and in an accompanying exhibition catalogue. It is described as a 20,000 square foot overview of the artist's work from 2003-2011. The author of this article has an essay on the website, which is read aloud by a Bahamian school teacher (see Project tab - Sheller), and was invited to "co-host" a launch party for the show in Manhattan, yet like the wider public was never able to learn the actual location of the show or to see the works *in situ*.

² Aspects of the project "Orthostatic Tolerance" were shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (April 24–August 2, 2009), where the author first met the artist and curators; at Grand Arts in Kansas City, MO (February 5–April 3, 2010), with the title "The Orthostatic Tolerance: Launching into an Infinite Space"; and at MIT's List Visual Arts Center (May 7–July 11, 2010), with the title "Orthostatic Tolerance: It Might Not Be Such a Bad Idea If I Never Went Home".

³ The Bahamas are located in the Atlantic Ocean, but are usually included in a Caribbean culture zone because of their shared social, economic, and political history, including European discovery in 1492, subsequent colonization, a collapse of the indigenous population, history of African enslavement, and recent national independence (1973).

⁴ Born in 1979 in Nassau, Bahamas, Tavares Strachan is based in New York, NY. Strachan holds a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from Yale University. He has had a very successful "international" career, and his work has been written about in periodicals such as *New York Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *Art Papers*, *Flash Art* and *Art in America*. Strachan's solo exhibitions include *Orthostatic Tolerance: It Might Not Be Such a Bad Idea if I Never Went Home Again*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA (2010); *Orthostatic Tolerance: Launching from an Infinite Distance*, Grand Arts, Kansas City, MO (2010); *Tavares Strachan: Orthostatic Tolerance*, the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (2009); *Where We Are is Always Miles Away*, The Luggage Store, San Francisco, CA (2006); and *The Difference Between What We Have and What We Want*, Albury Sayle Primary School, Nassau, The

Bahamas (2006).

⁵ See <http://venicebahamas2013.org/>.

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http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/46287865/ns/technology_and_science-science/t/strange-life-found-underwater-caves/#.T2CmyMrHKXU. Accessed 3/14/12.

⁷ It is nonetheless significant that rather than producing a purely conceptual artwork knowable only within the rarified realms of the art world, Strachan does go "back home" and is at pains to make his work accessible, including to school children at his former primary school in Nassau, using storytelling, performances and lectures.

⁸ In 1961 U.S. astronaut Virgil "Gus" Grissom infamously ended his 15-minute suborbital flight with the accidental sinking of his capsule Liberty Bell 7 in the Atlantic Ocean off of Grand Bahama Island (where it was recovered in 1999 by a Discovery Channel expedition). In 1962 the first two Americans to orbit the earth, John Glenn and Scott Carpenter, splashed down in the Atlantic Ocean close to the Turks and Caicos Islands and were brought to the US Air Force Base on Grand Turk for debriefing. Joseph Michael Acaba was the first NASA astronaut of Puerto Rican origin, flying on mission STS-119 from March 15 to March 28, 2009 to deliver the final set of solar arrays to the International Space Station. Strachan's BASEC lunar surface rover is named after the first African-American astronaut, Robert Lawrence, who died in a launch explosion.

⁹ Gagarin, made the first space flight and Earth orbit aboard Vostok-1 on 12 April 1961, today commemorated around the world as Yuri's Night (<http://yurisnight.net/>).

¹⁰ <http://www.pierogi2000.com/flatfile/strachantastronaut.html> accessed 2/12/10.

¹¹ For example, in 2004 New-York-based Puerto Rican artist Adal Maldonado's project "Coconauts in Space" appropriated famous shots from the 1969 NASA moon landing and inserted Puerto Rican references and "Cocoanauts" into them, claiming a prior 1963 moon landing. Gilles Elie-Dit-Cosaque made the film *Zétwal* (2008), a fictional docu-drama about a self-made Martiniquan astronaut. And Bajan artists Ewan Atkinson and Ingrid Persaud's "Starman" series explored themes of the outsider as part of "Black Diaspora Visual Art: A Series of Symposiums, Film Presentations & Exhibitions" in Barbados in 2009 (see <http://www.ewanatkinson.com/ewanatkinson.com/Starman.html>).

¹² Mark Dery, "Black to the Future", <http://www.detritus.net/contact/rumori/200211/0319.html>. See also Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, London: Quartet Books, 1999; and Ken McLeod "Space oddities: aliens, futurism and meaning in popular music", *Popular Music* (2003), 22: 3: 337-355. On the production of African-American identity in science fiction and fantasy texts see Andre Carrington, *Through a Lens, Darkly: Blackness in Speculative*

Fiction and Media, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

¹³ On recent revivals of the movement, see Lanre Bakare, "Afro-futurism Takes Flight: From Sun Ra to Janelle Monae", *The Guardian*, 24 July 2014. Accessed 30 July 2014 at <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/jul/24/space-is-the-place-flying-lotus-janelle-monae-afr ofuturism>.

¹⁴ Brooklyn Art Museum, *Street to Studio: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Accessed 31 July 2014. http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/basquiat/street-to-studio/english/explore_cultural.php

¹⁵ Eleuthera is a long thin island in the Bahamas, whose name in Greek means "free"; it was also the site of a US Auxiliary Airforce base and the US Air Force Eastern Test Range (ETR) Range Tracking Station #4, in the 1960s-70s.

¹⁶ Tavares Strachan in conversation with Professor Robert Hobbs, ICA, Philadelphia, 15 July 2009.

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