

***IN THE FOREGROUND:  
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING***

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“WHAT ‘MINOR HISTORIES’ ALLOW US TO SEE”  
DONETTE FRANCIS ON WRITING AFRICAN DIASPORA**

Season 5, Episode 2  
Recording date: December 13, 2022  
Release date: March 28, 2023

**Transcript**

**Caro Fowler**

Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

In this episode, you'll hear from me, Caitlin Woolsey, Assistant Director of the Research and Academic Program. I speak with Donette Francis, an associate professor of English at the University of Miami, Coral Gables and a founding member of the Hemispheric Caribbean Studies Collective. Donette's research and writing investigate place, aesthetics, and cultural politics in the African diaspora and they discuss the politics of making visible what she calls "minor histories." Across her work on the novel as well as in the realm of contemporary art, Donette invites us to ask: What does attending to these histories allow us to see?

**Donette Francis**

*"I am deeply interested in what 'minor' stories enable us to see....How is it that these artists are trying to go against the grander narratives about what we think about Caribbean stories or art history and practices? And what do the[se artists] do differently, and how do their gestures or their commitments—their aesthetic commitments—allow us to see a different kind of project and politics of placemaking?"*

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Thank you so much for joining me today, Donette. It's a real pleasure to have a chance to speak with you.

**Donette Francis**

Thank you for inviting me to be in conversation.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Usually we begin by asking guests to reflect on their orientation toward the arts, or early influences?

**Donette Francis**

I would say that the fundamental thing that has shaped my intellectual imagination, that would later develop as my intellectual formation, is my identity or status as an immigrant. And therefore as an outsider. So rather than being granted access or entitlement to citizenship, I had to be naturalized into citizenship, had to take a test. I always think of myself as, in an immigrant sense, of working to belong both to the US and to the country of my birth, Jamaica.

So I came here at [age] 7. Finding my sense of place, belonging, or home has always been through the arts. Whether that was through books, mostly fiction, the act of going to libraries and museums on my own as a teenager, that gave me a relationship to Manhattan, and taking the subway from Brooklyn to navigate the various arteries of the city. So books, like museums, allowed me to imagine other worlds outside of my own, or to place myself in other places, and other times. So for me, for example coming of age in New York City in 1980s, early nineties, it was the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That was my museum of choice. And it wasn't a particular artist or a material object, but rather the act of meandering, wandering from one room to the other, and the different worlds that you could encounter walking through that museum. So from continental Africa to Asia, the ancient Near Eastern art, Egyptian art, as well as European and American paintings. And so for me it was a meditative, contemplative space and it gave me a sense of what counted as grand, epic histories or the canon.

I wouldn't have then had a language to think about colonial histories or the fraught histories of collecting and looting of cultural objects. These are the things that later as a critic I would spend time deconstructing. But then, I was an ideal spectator of sorts, and it was a sort of contemplative awe of going to a historical museum. And that for me has particular resonance now, living as I do now in the city of Miami, that's saturated with contemporary art. And there are no historical art museums, right? So I think about the difference of what it means or what it meant to come of age engaging the Metropolitan Museum and later the Brooklyn Museum, to now living in a place where what is on offer is contemporary art, almost exclusively.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

You mentioned not having the language to think about colonialism and that fraught history, but do you feel like you were aware of the elisions in a collection like the Metropolitan's?

**Donette Francis**

So I think it would be later that I would learn to, for example, look to see myself and my history in a museum space. I think back then I was just, consuming the worlds that were on offer and trying to think about: What were the different art objects? How did they speak to each other?

I think another way of answering that question would be that coming from Brooklyn, which to me felt like several different immigrant enclaves. It was younger and more unsettled, although it has a deep, long history of immigrant settlement. But you felt like there were so many neighborhoods of new immigrant settlement or new migrants. So Brooklyn already felt like a place in the making that I was a part of.

Entering into the city [Manhattan], that was the place of established, settled old histories and old institutions. In going to the museum there, I already again saw myself as an outsider to that place, and it was me trying to engage, What is the museum? What are the stories that they're telling? I didn't see myself in the stories being told. I would've questioned how Africa was being represented. But I wasn't looking to connect a dot between my immigrant history and the settled ways in which these institutions would've told those stories. I had already seen myself as outside of that project. Because there wouldn't have been any contemporary art, for example, focusing on contemporary African American or contemporary African diasporic art.

For me, museum-going was just a contemplative space of seeing how settled institutions settle on what stories count as history. So it was not a space back then that I thought that I was going to intervene in. It was a place that I was watching how narratives get constructed.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Did cultural studies or some of these other fields in the humanities feel like a space was possible to enter?

**Donette Francis**

I would say before I became an academic there were two other instances, both with books, that in some ways felt more intimate and there was more of an

identification. It's interesting that on reflection with you, I'm seeing how the literary had a deep sense of identification for me.

It was in the fifth grade that my aunt gave me a book of poetry by Phyllis Wheatley. And then in the seventh grade, my best friend's mom gave us a copy—her copy—of Tony Morrison's *Sula* to share. And I never returned that book. But I remember those two books having a profound impact on me because I was situating *myself* in the story. With the book by Phyllis Wheatley, it was teaching me something about slavery and literacy.

And then with Tony Morrison's *Sula*, I kept wondering, why were we given this adult book? We were AP readers in seventh grade, but the book seemed like an adult book in that we were being invited into a different kind of conversation. There's a scene in *Sula* where the girls are walking down the street and the neighborhood men are calling out "pig meat" to them. They're navigating what it means to walk, to be a walker, [to be] in the street as a young Black woman, and having a sense of agency around oneself.

I think that those books opened up a lot of questions for me. What does it mean to think about slavery and literacy? What does it mean to think about black female agency? Although I wouldn't then have had a language like this. Part of a Black feminist intellectual tradition, that's what those two books opened up for me. I always cherish those two moments.

It's interesting that as I think about my path, literature was a way for me to see myself as part of a tradition and to ask questions that were related to myself. as a part of a broader intellectual tradition. And the museum was a space of me watching how history and narrative is crafted. The book, the thing that you can touch felt more immediate, whereas the objects felt more curated and at a distance, but still for me a desired distance. I enjoyed and still do enjoy going through the space of a museum, preferably by myself, so I can be more meditative.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

How do you think about the intersections of your research and writing in relation to the arts?

**Donette Francis**

One way of answering this question is to go back to the other question that you asked: How did I come to where I settle in terms of the intersection of working between the visual arts, and literary studies? For me, that happens in graduate school, when I did my MA in English at Howard University and I was trained by an impressive generation of Black feminist scholars. They were Jennifer Jordan and Eleanor Traylor and Evelyn Hawthorne. And they were, broadly speaking, Caribbeans, African Americanists, African diasporic scholars. They were working in a Black intellectual tradition that saw any art or cultural text in the context of the broader socio-historical context out of which it emerges.

And I didn't have the luxury, for example, like in the contemporary moment, when we think of Caribbean art, we often think Anglophone Caribbean, Hispanophone Caribbean, and the like. Back then we were doing the Caribbean broadly, as comparatively as possible, even though we were working in the tradition of working with English language texts. A Howard training [sought] to be as broad and as holistic as possible in encountering the work. And so therefore they were teaching me—although I didn't know it—that I had to work across disciplines in order to get at anything approaching a complete understanding of the text. I think that was very important in terms of my intellectual formation.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

In one of your articles, writing about Jamaica in the 1970s, you lay out the aims of rethinking cultural and sociopolitical history with an imperative of capturing geopolitical locations, different generational dispositions, and disciplinary guidelines. I was interested if you might reflect on how you think about these imperatives as a kind of general framework that structures your own research, thinking, writing, or teaching?

**Donette Francis**

I would say that a fundamental pedagogical and scholarly imperative of mine is that I believe that cultural and artistic phenomena are shaped by time and place. I think that one of the contributions of David Scott's work, for example: He asks us to remember it's easy enough to look back at a text or look back at a particular historical moment and think that they got it wrong. But I think what he invites us to ask is, What were their generational questions that they were

seeking answers to in their moment versus what might be our generational questions, right? I found in his work the most precise way of articulating that. So in fact, I teach that introductory chapter from [his book] *Conscripts of Modernity* to almost every graduate class I teach because I want students to understand that the task of the class is not to say what a particular text gets wrong, what a particular scholar gets wrong, but rather to historicize each text intervention in its moment.

And once we understand that, then we have a place to begin. It's not to begin with the traditional graduate student critique of: This didn't work. That didn't work. But rather: What were their questions? What was that intervention? And therefore, we can understand what our relationship is to that trajectory.

I find that when I am reading and writing about cultural texts, whether these are texts from the seventies, the fifties, or my contemporary moment, I ask: What is it that they're responding to? In my first book, I'm looking at a group of Caribbean women writers that are critiquing, through the embodied histories of their female characters, what they felt didn't quite work with the decolonial and nationalist projects of the 1960s and 70s. So this is an intervention that they're making in the 1990s and the early aughts. But it's generational critique of what they felt was then maybe a male-centric set of interventions in an earlier moment. And so that they offer that critique and it's a generational critique that's deeply gendered. And in many of those texts, although they're writing in the late nineties and early aughts, they're going back to these earlier historical moments to make those critiques of, let's say, the 1914 the US occupation in Haiti, in the 1960s the nationalist movement in Jamaica. And they're taking us back to those historical moments to make the critique of those moments. But the critique really is of them as female or feminist intellectuals in the current moment saying that there's something that we didn't quite get right. Situating it first out of the moment from which they're speaking, and then the histories into which they're trying to seek some sort of revision and repair.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Do you feel the sitedness of writing and critique is something that you understood quite early on?

**Donette Francis**

There have been several experiences as I was becoming an academic or becoming an intellectual that kind of insisted on that historical awareness and historical positionality. Again, because I came out of an American studies program at NYU in the late nineties, I remember taking Robin Kelley's Black Diaspora Course. And Robin is a historian, and the first thing he said to us in that class was, How many of you have written a book?—to which none of us could raise our hands. And he said, Ok, so your first mode of engagement will not be a mode of dismantling the text. I've always held onto that moment.

Another historian Lisa Duggan, again at NYU, she was teaching a feminist history course. One of the things that she taught me to do, which again I do now in all the books that I read, but also I teach students how to read this way as well— one of the things that she did was she taught us how to read the acknowledgements as almost the first way into the text. Because in the acknowledgements you get to see the intellectual community that person is a part of, and how that situates their network of ideas and intellectual community. I always find that really engaging. So when I pick up a scholarly text, the first thing I do is to see, Who are your intellectual—who are the people—you're engaged with? And so before you even begin to think about what doesn't quite work of the book, it allows you to situate what that book. Who that book is in conversation with, and what kind of intervention the book might see itself making.

I think that orientation to critical, to contextualize the material that you're engaging, I've found since graduate school actually, so this is upwards of 20 years. Those have been the lasting lessons and the takeaways that I take into my own teaching and my own research and writing. When I come to a place or a text, I'm always thinking about, What is the world that this text inhabits? And what are the conditions that they're speaking to, and trying to speak through, or to offer some critique of?

**Caitlin Woolsey**

To go back to something you said a few minutes ago, in some of your writing you explore ideas around the “concrete language of the body”—this is a phrase you use. And I know in some of your more recent work as well, looking at visual arts, you've been thinking about these questions of history and narrative as it relates to cultural objects, in some cases ceramic vessels or objects that might be seen

as an extension of or stand-in for the body. Maybe this [question] is a way of opening onto some of your current projects, how you are thinking about this kind of concrete language of the body, whether it's in criticism or in literature or in the artistic practices that you're grappling with by contemporary artists?

**Donette Francis**

What's interesting to me is that what emerged as my first book, *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*, I think I had to stumble on what I was reading and recognizing. That it wasn't a singular text, but that there were a number of texts doing similar work that would then amount to what we might think of as a cohort of writers across the Francophone, Anglophone, Hispanophone Caribbean world that were insisting on not only talking about the body, but talking about the bodily vulnerabilities of women and girls.

It was so ubiquitous that I had to pause and say, Okay, so we're actually up to perhaps another wave, right? A third wave, let's say, of Caribbean women's writings, where it wasn't enough to simply tell women's stories or tell the stories of women and girls, but to actually tell the story around the sexual vulnerabilities of Caribbean women and girls. And putting that on the table as something that we have to think about when we are thinking and talking through issues of citizenship.

So I felt like they were a part of a moment that allowed us—long before Me Too—to think about issues of sexual citizenship as central to any way that we were going to think and theorize the nation and its aftermath. It wasn't enough to talk about national failure as the economic decline post-independence or failed nation states, but actually, that there's a way that both nation and families were colluding in terms of thinking about the health and well-being of Caribbean women and girls. And these texts were mainly in diaspora. Diaspora in that moment seemed like a safer space to tell those stories than people who were still situated on the island. There were a number of us I think at that moment who from our different disciplinary lens told that story.

In the contemporary moment, when I moved to Miami I started engaging these artists, and the visual arts is almost the most developed discipline in Miami. But as I started engaging the artists—and here I'm thinking about Juana Valdez in particular—I am just watching her studio practice, looking at the arc of the body of her work.

And then again here it dawned on me: Juana's particular histories here, intimate histories, intimate social histories, that she's telling about the domestic sphere that opens up to broader social histories of laboring bodies moving through national and transnational spaces, and between different imperial powers. You never see a body in her practice. So there's this commitment to the non-figurative. And then I had to think about, Why is it that there is a commitment in her practice to the non-figurative?

This is where I then situate her own intellectual formation, the time and place that she comes of age here in Miami, as an Afro-Cuban, and all of the fraught histories of what it means to be a visual artist, a Black visual artist, and what are the different political regimes that are censoring [her], right? In Miami, we think about Castro's regime and censorship on the island. But I think anytime that people spend a long enough time in Miami, you recognize that there's also a censoring agent here. Sometimes we think about it as an earlier generation of Cuban exiles, but not only. So I think [I was] watching Juana navigate what it means to have two censoring agents: there's the Cuba she left behind, and there are the strictures of the Cuban Miami that she's a part of. And how does she tell the stories that she wants to tell? And I think the easiest way for her to tell those stories is to do it through the non-figurative.

So then for each artist, I'm watching what they do or do not do with the body, how the body shows up or does not show up, and why. So that's Juana Valdez, but for example, there's another contemporary artist that I'm really interested in right now, and her name is Kandy Lopez. Kandy's more recent art practice is visualizing the bodies of people of color. So initially she would do these sort of bodies of people in space. And it's interesting that she's coming from a tradition of moving between the DR [Dominican Republic] and Miami and New Jersey, and that she chooses to just have these, in many cases Black female, bodies in space or Black and brown female bodies in space, that don't necessarily have facial features. And that's a feature that we see in Dominican painting, for example.

But her more recent practice, she's using yarn to do these beautiful portraits, big life-size portraiture of Black and brown bodies, insisting that they take up all this space. And oftentimes on those canvases, you don't necessarily see the backdrop of the city. You just see the body, the stylized body, and the different gradations of color that she's able to capture. And I think that there's the feminine practice of yarning that she's bringing into the public culture with the work that she's

producing. I would say again here, for me: Who is the artist and what is it that they're trying to make visible? And what is the politics behind that particular visibility? And so what it means, although for example, Juana Valdez knows someone like Kandy [Lopez], but it's important to me that where Juana's political history might mean that she *doesn't* show the body, Kandy's commitment is to a particular politics of visualizing Black and brown bodies in portraiture. But not portraiture that's oil on canvas necessarily, but other ways to render it visible that has her intimate, I would say feminine, touch to it, or feminine style or feminine aesthetic to it.

So those are just two examples of different ways that I am watching, whether it's through figuration or through portraiture and different ways of rendering portraiture, that the artists are trying to tell these particular stories. I am deeply interested in what 'minor' histories enable us to see. And so although I'm focused on these two artists now—who I think in the next five to ten years will be major contenders; I think Juana's already there, and I see Kandy getting there as well—the heart of their stories are telling minor histories, right? They allow us to see what the margins are able to teach us.

I think of the work that they do as edge work. Like, what does it mean to sit at the edge of particular neighborhoods, where you see the intersection of Black and brown identities, Black and brown communities trying to make a life together? What are the collisions that are there? What are some of the pleasures? What are some of the discriminations? And how is it that these artists are trying to go against the grander narratives of what we might say about, for example, Miami's cultural diversity? Or grander narratives about what we think about Cuban or Caribbean stories or art history and practices? and what do they do differently, and what in their gestures or their commitments—their aesthetic commitments—allow us to see a different kind of project and politics of placemaking?

I think that's what draws me to the artists that I'm drawn to. I think that all of them are committed to a different aesthetic practice of making, whether it be the materials that they're using or the kinds of ways that they want us to linger on certain gestures, certain bodily gestures, the kind of places or hues that they want to render in their artwork, the kinds of textures that they want to insist matter. I think initially, people would encounter the yarn, for example, of Kandy's work and render it minor, right? Render it less "fine art." And she has a

whole language about going into Michael's, for example, and getting what she can afford. But getting what she can afford and rendering it, in my estimation, "high art." And so I'm interested in those artists that are playing with form and material and texture to try to get at what we can see from the margins, of these minor histories that cut through grand narratives. And I think that's the through-line in all of my work, right? I'm very much interested in what the minor histories allow us to see.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

I wondered if you might share a little bit about your current book project, or some of the things that you're thinking about right now in your work?

**Donette Francis**

My current book project is called *Creole Miami: Black Arts in the Magic City*, and it centers the art practices of a multiethnic and multigenerational group of Black Miami artists. Taking its title from a foundational keyword in Caribbean studies, which is "Creole" and theories of Creolization, which at its best studies how power works in a given time and place. I turn this conceptual lens to a city that celebrates diversity as its signature brand. And here I'm interested in making visible what such narratives of multiculturalism obscure.

Four areas come together. In my work on Black Miami arts, the first is "capital." So art is central to the city's DNA, and the arts are a major driver of economic and tourist development. I'm interested in the art industries that have emerged or expanded in Miami, in the wake of Art Basel, which was first launched in 2002. I'm exploring the entanglements between the visual arts as an industrial complex, real estate development, and gentrification.

This leads to another area that I explore, which is persistent Black displacement. So the arts landscape then is a central site of displacement in Miami, as Black and brown spaces and neighborhoods are continually grazed to erect new art venues. Our present conjuncture finds us at a precarious crossroads where longtime residents and artists and other low- and middle-income folks are being priced out of living in Miami's historically Black and brown neighborhoods.

The third theme I explore in the project is around race and migration. I'm tracking the new racial formations that have emerged in Miami as a result of migrations largely from Latin America and the Caribbean in the latter half of the

20th century. That has transformed this southern US city into the capital of the Caribbean. So Miami is simultaneously the imperial hemispheric capital of the Americas, and yet deeply rooted in the Jim Crow South. Miami makes both visible and audible how regional migration has transformed this US city, as the Hispanophone, Anglophone, and Francophone Caribbean structures the quotidian rhythms, pleasures, and skirmishes of the cultural political sphere. Consequently, I believe that the city exposes how Caribbean and Latin American immigrants and migrants have reproduced white supremacy and normalized sentiments and practices of anti-Blackness that have traveled from their countries of origin and which have become exacerbated when confronting existing racial formations. So when the larger national and international world and the city itself celebrates the city's diversity as signature to its touristic and economic branding, this structural underbelly is often elided.

And I feel like this is one of the ways in which Miami becomes important for us to think about what the future of these minority majority spaces afford us. I think it offers an important cautionary tale. And finally, this leads to the heart of the project, where I center Black artists producing counter cartographies or counter aesthetics and response. So the book project explores how across various artistic disciplines—visual arts, literature, film, playwriting, and music—Black Miami artists transform and expand the very structure of canonical art forms to accommodate Miami specific aesthetic sensibilities that expand and generate different social, environmental, and political geographies of Blackness, Caribbeanness, and Indigeneity that transforms the limits of the nation states.

Attending to the art created by these Miami-shaped Black hemispheric artists makes visible a sensorial Black body that reaches across and beyond the US nation state, and expands and disrupts our understandings of time, geography, gender, and genealogies. So it's both art subject and art form. Foregrounding Blackness in Miami, I believe, helps us to see not only Blackness differently, but the geographies of race relations more transnationally and arguably more complexly.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

One thing I really appreciate about how you frame the project is holding all of these tensions together; that the way that Miami has become this art world center offers opportunities for Black and brown artists and Indigenous artists, at the same time that that same system is also disenfranchising communities in the

area. I love that phrase you used of “counter cartographies.” You speak so evocatively about your commitments, and I'm also curious to think about them in relation to how you find yourself within the discipline?

**Donette Francis**

I think actually the field of Caribbean art history is coming into its own. From Krista Thompson to Samantha Noël, to my colleague here, Erica James, to my colleague Jerry Philogene. Different scholars will have their own, how would I call it—desires, right? Intellectual desires. And some of that might be to focus on what we think the Caribbean affords in seeing, we might think about what something like tidalectics: what a Caribbean understanding of thinking about the importance of waterways, the importance of climate change, the importance of sugar, the importance of salt, certain commodities. So other people will go into it to think through whatever rich histories they think that the Caribbean can help us see. And I share some of that disposition.

What I have come to realize, because I'm really interested in place politics and aesthetics, is that in coming to Miami, my relationship to the Caribbean has changed, or my relationship to Caribbean studies has changed. Because the politics of place in Miami means that the Caribbean can be called upon to do a certain kind of diversity work that is deeply problematic, and that creates its own kind of violences, structural violences within the city, or hierarchies. So I find myself in Miami trying to think about the ways that Blackness and anti-Blackness and the hierarchies within Blackness, how that plays out alongside and against other hierarchies that we might think of as a part of Latin America. How do those two spaces meet in Miami, where we're a 70% Latina city? So what does that mean? How does the Caribbean figure here? Certainly there are moments where we see certain invisibility, but there are also moments where it is called upon to do certain kinds of diversity work that allow us to elide or articulate anti-Black sentiments.

I didn't have that disposition or that awareness in a place like New York [City], which is not to say that there weren't tensions there as well, but I think that those tensions are amplified in a place like Miami, where it's a Caribbean and Latin American city. So where does Blackness and native Blackness fit into the story that we tell?

I feel like I'm deeply engaged now in unearthing those kinds of stories and making sure that the stories that I tell try to capture the complexities—not romanticize—but the complexities of Blackness in the fullness of itself, the spectrum of itself, the hierarchies within how that plays itself out in a place like Miami.

And then to ask, What then does that teach us in terms of how we do Black studies, how we do American studies, how we do Caribbean studies, right? Because it takes away any sense of false innocence that we can have around not only our histories and our contemporary politics, but then how the art and art-making practices—whether we're talking about the visual, the literary or otherwise—how that plays into a broader ecosystem of the arts in Miami.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Donette, I'm grateful to have gotten to know both the rigor of your thinking, but also just how generous you are as a thinker and in conversation with others. Thank you for willing to continue that with me for the podcast.

**Donette Francis**

Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to resources referenced in the conversation, please visit [clarkart.edu/rap/podcast](http://clarkart.edu/rap/podcast). This program was produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with Caroline Fowler; music by lightchaser; sound editing by CJ DeGennaro; and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Maggie O'Connor.

The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.