

The French Caribbean Landscape in the Nineteenth-Century Imagination

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France's victory in the 2018 World Cup brought the complexity of what it means to be French to the attention of spectators worldwide, as an energetic, young, diverse team triumphed on a global stage. In public spaces across France, euphoric crowds erupted into energetic celebration, from the tree-lined Haussmannian boulevards of Paris to the tropical streets of Fort-de-France, Martinique, over four thousand miles away.

Martinique and its sister island Guadeloupe occupy a unique position as insular Caribbean regions of France. On one hand, the islands are distinctly Caribbean spaces, with cultural ties that extend beyond national and linguistic boundaries. On the other hand, they are unmistakably French—from the governmental structure to the familiar brands found in stores and supermarkets. I always think of the French Caribbean as the only place where you can order a perfect baguette with a glass of fresh guava juice.

But the experience of being both French and Caribbean runs far deeper. As with most questions of identity and nationhood, this duality is infinitely nuanced and is largely a matter of

perspective. In my own personal experience, Martinique brings forth childhood summer memories of chickens in my grandparents' yard, of learning how to sew, listening to our neighbors yelling in creole, and chasing my cousins up steep grassy slopes.

My academic research examines the ways in which artists depicted and imagined the French Caribbean landscape during the nineteenth century. The idea of the French Caribbean as a place that straddles the realms of the "exotic" Caribbean and the familiar French metropole is useful in understanding nineteenth-century conceptions of the region. In her recent book *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire*, historian Lorelle Semley discusses this seemingly paradoxical positioning in the context of Martinique's cultural capital city of Saint-Pierre, which was known as "The Little Paris of the Antilles."¹ As far back as the 1830s—a decade before the abolition of slavery in the French colonies—travel writers pointed to the exotic familiarity of the Martiniquan city. An 1836 book entitled *Voyage pittoresque dans les deux Amériques*² particularly stands out for the way its text

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emphasizes the island's connections to France, while its engraved illustrations highlight the exotic elements—which is logical for a genre that rests largely on the creation of fantastic narratives of faraway places.

The complexity of the nineteenth-century French Caribbean landscape was often simplified and reduced for audiences. Travel and tourist imagery was largely predicated on the production of generalized images for each destination, an idea discussed by Krista Thompson in her book *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*.³ Martinique—like many other Caribbean islands—became known through images of its lush botanical gardens, and of its bustling streets and markets in which figures sold exotic wares. The statue and birthplace of Josephine de Beauharnais, the first wife of Emperor Napoleon, became symbols that explicitly connected the island to the “glory days” of Imperial France. Rarely published in travel books, however, were images of Martinique's state-of-the-art drydock facility⁴ or of the rural plantation landscape that was central to the island's main exports. Needless to say, when Paul Gauguin and his friend Charles Laval traveled to Martinique in 1887, their artistic practice also centered

largely on the search for new, exotic vistas. After the eruption of Mt. Pelée in 1902, the tropical imagery that had typified so many nineteenth-century images gave way to a more sinister, barren landscape of destruction, which would be consumed across the ocean through stereoscopic photographs.

Today, Martinique and Guadeloupe continue to occupy the unique position of being both French and Caribbean. The islands no longer bear the status of “colony,” although the long-lasting effects of historical power structures certainly continue to impact the postcolonial condition of these spaces. The conventions of visual art have also drastically expanded since the nineteenth century, as is made clear by the variety of media used by the artists whose works are included here at Hunter East Harlem Gallery.

Most importantly, the artists in this exhibition identify and engage with the French Caribbean on a personal level. Their goal is not to reduce and simplify, but to speak to the multiplicity of perspectives and narratives within the region. Each artist brings their own unique style and process into the gallery in order to visually respond to a group of islands that a distant observer once called “dust specks on the sea,” but that many others call home.

1 Lorelle Semley, “When Blacks Broke the Chains in the ‘Little Paris of the Antilles,’” *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

2 Alcide Dessalines d'Orbigny, *Voyage pittoresque dans les deux Amériques: résumé général de tous les voyages de Colomb, Las Casas, etc* (Paris: L. Tenré & Henri Dupuy, 1836).

3 Krista Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

4 An album by the US photographer Solomon Nunes Carvalho held at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture features numerous images of the drydocks, yet none were engraved for the published account of his voyage in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.