

# *Tout Moun*

*Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies*

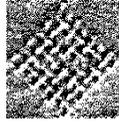
*Seeking Space  
Shaping Aesthetics*

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<http://www.mainlib.uwi.tt/epubs/toutmoun/index1.htm>

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*A (NotSo) New Day for Caribbean Literature and  
the Arts: An Interview with Marielle Barrow  
on Digital Humanities and Archiving  
Caribbean Culture*



AMÍLCAR SANATAN

Marielle Barrow is a Trinidad and Tobago-based, Fulbright Scholar and PhD. graduate of the George Mason University, USA. Prior to her studies abroad, she was a graduate of The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine and Mona campuses for her Bachelor's and Master's studies. Her research centres on building communities of practice for visual and literary artists, cultural policy and establishing infrastructure for a Caribbean creative industry. Thus, her analysis of Caribbean culture is continually connected to sustainable development, economic growth and an examination of the viability of public-private partnership business models for culture. In 2011, Dr. Barrow founded *Caribbean InTransit* which was led by a collective of thirty-three professionals – artists, writers and academics – from the Caribbean, US and Europe. The organisation publishes a multi-lingual, open access, peer-reviewed academic arts journal highlighting literary, visual and performing arts, architecture and design, and, features of their community based work with youth from under-resourced communities. To date they have published five journal issues. The issues are available for download on their website and the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC)<sup>1</sup>.

The Caribbean, by definition, transcends geographic, political, and language boundaries. Hence, attempts to encapsulate the entirety of the region in one language, institution or field of study are limited. Through the use of digital technologies and media, Caribbean literature and arts, from an interdisciplinary perspective, have found greater connections than in the past. Open-access archives in the digital humanities create wider audiences and inclusion of people in the region to the research materials, archives and cultural works of Caribbean creators. This interview illustrates where connections are made through the digital humanities and the harsh realities that break those connections.

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<sup>1</sup> The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) is an online archive of cultural, historical and research materials. The website is administered by the Florida International University (FIU). (See: <http://www.dloc.com> )

The digital humanities may be defined as:

“...a scholarship (and a pedagogy) that is publicly visible in ways to which we are generally unaccustomed, a scholarship and pedagogy that are bound up with infrastructure in ways that are deeper and more explicit than we are generally accustomed to, a scholarship and pedagogy that are collaborative and depend on networks of people and that live and active, 24-7 life online.” (Kirschenbaum 2010, 6)

Barrow’s *Caribbean InTransit* is an innovative example of the digital humanities in the region today. Similarly, *The Caribbean Memory Project*<sup>2</sup>, led by Dr. Kevin Browne of The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus highlight the growing interest in the field. At The UWI, most scholarly journals are published online and increasingly they are open-access. Yet, the potential of the form is not harnessed for advancing knowledge to new content creators and audiences, fostering technological innovation and serving the cultural, literary and literacy needs of the public. Throughout the interview, Barrow notes the challenges in establishing and leveraging networks for artists and cultural workers to exchange ideas and build communities of practice online and offline. More profoundly, the interview situates her grounded approach to Caribbean culture which promotes scholarly and activist work to improve the material conditions of artists and literary voices.

Digital humanities bring complexities to mainstream institutions for the arts and literature. While it is recognised for developing, “...fluid communities of practice, asking and answering research questions that cannot be reduced to a single genre, medium, discipline, or institution” (Burdick 2012 et al., vi), this interview explores how access to finance and positioning in/out of the academy has implications for advancing this format.

For these reasons, I interviewed Marielle Barrow, founder and editor-in-chief of *Caribbean InTransit* in Trinidad and Tobago. As the discussion unfolded I became interested in the following questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of developing a cultural model?
2. What has been the impact of digital technologies and media on Caribbean literary and artistic communities of practice?
3. How has the Caribbean embrace the potential of the digital humanities today?

I situate this interview as a discussion between two scholar-artist-activists based in the region involved in youth development work. Barrow represents a young creative voice in the region eager to innovate and expand access to Caribbean culture for Caribbean people and global audiences. The interview makes the point that in spite of the institutional and attitudinal obstacles

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<sup>2</sup> The Caribbean Memory Project is an online cultural heritage research platform. (See: <http://www.caribbeanmemoryproject.com/about.html> )

in the way of advancing Caribbean culture through digital humanities, the artist always finds a way.

### **Creative Communities and Industry**

**AS:** *You were recently awarded a PhD. in Cultural Studies from the George Mason University in Virginia, USA. The title of your dissertation was “Counter-memory and Cultural Capital: The Arts as Sustainable Civic Practice in the Caribbean.” Discuss the main ideas of your research.*

**MB:** Essentially I am looking at how artists are creating counter cultural memory forms in the actual format of their work – the spiritual, the carnivalesque, the ways they are denying the gaze in the use of monochromatic form. It’s a range of aspects that are forming aspects of “counter-cultural memory”. It is about the artist who goes anti-establishment and the monographic authorial voice of history. This is practiced daily and lived, this is what I have framed as counter-cultural memory. Artists in particular are creating in these formats.

The cultural capital part is about aggregating and creating networks which are able to transgress the ‘normal’, governmental and institutional formats. [For example] All the backyard spaces, such as Alice Yard<sup>3</sup>, Pop Up and others across the region. Networking is going beyond that. What we have seen is, in spite of the lack of industry infrastructure, [artists] are having a voice on the world stage. The art exhibitions in the US and diaspora, are pan-Caribbean practice. In the thesis I looked specifically at Haiti, Trinidad and the Bahamas and the differences and distinctions between those landscapes. In Haiti, I describe the art landscape as ‘conductive practice’ where the artists are involved in transference, which is a lived experience of art. Then I looked at Trinidad as a ‘disjunctive’ art space to evaluate the factions and fragmentations of the art community and finally, the Bahamas where I saw a ‘communicative space’ where artists may not be in sync with each other in various ways, but there is really a strong sense of camaraderie, apprenticeship and support for younger artists to get scholarships. In Bahamas, there is more of an industry for art.

**AS:** *Without a doubt, in the case of the Bahamas, the tourism economic model has influenced the aesthetics, financing, state involvement and communities of practices of the artistic landscape.*

**MB:** Of course, including their proximity to the US. I looked at all those factors in terms of why we all are where we are. The Bahamas, even though the rest of the Caribbean inaccurately looked at them as “not having culture”, artistically they are right up there, if not ahead.

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<sup>3</sup> Alice Yard is a space for visual and literary arts in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago curated by Sean Leonard, Christopher Cozier and Nicholas Laughlin. (See: <http://aliceyard.blogspot.com> )

**AS:** *I am interested in the conceptual framework of Caribbean InTransit. The publication is an academic journal yet it produces features and commentary similar to those in an art magazine. Interestingly, the journal offers insight into the arts, culture and also the creative industry in the Caribbean. In your words, you have said that there is a deep interest in the region for the development of arts for Caribbean economic development. Can you explain this notion more?*

**MB:** My work has long been in that track. I am passionate about art and I want artists to live off of what they do. Of course, the cultural industry globally has shown the potential of this thrust. In Trinidad and Tobago, we produce a high level of cultural output and that is something we should monetise instead of having other people coming in to monetise it for us. It is painstaking work. We are so behind in many ways.

**AS:** *That is interesting. I am cautious about seeing the state exploration of art as a magic bullet to address economic crisis and uncertainty in the region. This kind of talk has become increasingly popular. Sometimes when we think of art as an industry to stimulate growth, the rhetoric may either be too utilitarian or rigidly capitalist. On one hand, I see the value of your idea of cultural capital for economic benefits but on the other hand, cultural capital is critical for social transformation and change and therefore has an intrinsic value that should be maintained. What are your thoughts?*

**MB:** For me they go hand in hand. I start on a personal level where I cannot exist without my art. I believe there are many more people like me. People end up going in the wrong direction and become destructive to themselves and society because they are not allowed to be who they are. They need to live out their particular type of intelligence. While you are learning to do art and to produce money you are also being transformed by it. We need art to survive emotionally as people and for economic reasons.

Art therapy, dance therapy are alternative forms of wellness development. As a society we have patronised the arts because at a core level we recognise it is necessary to our emotional well-being. When we sit down to relax, we consume the arts, whichever format of it. People dance, go to the cinema and sing - We live the arts every day! We patronise the arts from a very foreign standpoint and there is a gap in our support for Caribbean art. We recognise that it is important on a basic level everyday but we often only pay lip service to it.

**AS:** *There are many linkages you have created with your work – the journal, the community-based projects, and the festival. International finance has been critical to the development of your work. Now you have this, there are project measurements you must evaluate in your work. I'd like to know more about the successes of developing a model for cultural work and also the limitations of developing a model itself.*

**MB:** The limitations are endless. I think I have had success in terms of my ability to do things despite the lack of finances but it was all at a huge personal sacrifice and most aren't willing to make it.

In terms of a cultural model it will always be developing. I try to show what culture can be in various forms by showing the role of research and development in the journal, the showcase and marketplace which are the festivals and the training which is "This Is Me" and the research collaboration for "In Situ". Essentially the model is taking all these different approaches, as a small architecture, a mini industry itself. One person cannot sustain this. I work with a team of over thirty volunteers across thirteen different countries but when you are not attached to an institution it becomes even more challenging to keep that going. There are definitely challenges but there have been successes as well.



*Marielle Barrow and other artists for the project, "The Book of Latent Promises", Haiti, 2013.*

## **Publishing a Journal for the Arts in the Caribbean**

**AS:** *What is the significance of open access journals in today's environment?*

**MB:** It was a fundamental decision I made. One of the major issues with arts in the Caribbean is that people generally don't have access to research, bibliographies and archives because we are still countries that do not document our culture effectively. The whole imperative of creating an open access journal is to give access to those who typically would not have access. If you are not attached to an institution you cannot access the most valuable resources, such as *Small Axe*. Non-academics and even independent scholars, how do they do their work? How do they continue to contribute? Trying to make this work is difficult. I got support from my university, George Mason University, when I started. I still have a feeling that writers and readers in the Caribbean do not fully understand the notion or construct of the journal within academia, so I cannot charge people to contribute or read in the journal. Financially it has been a conundrum for us but we'll see how it goes.

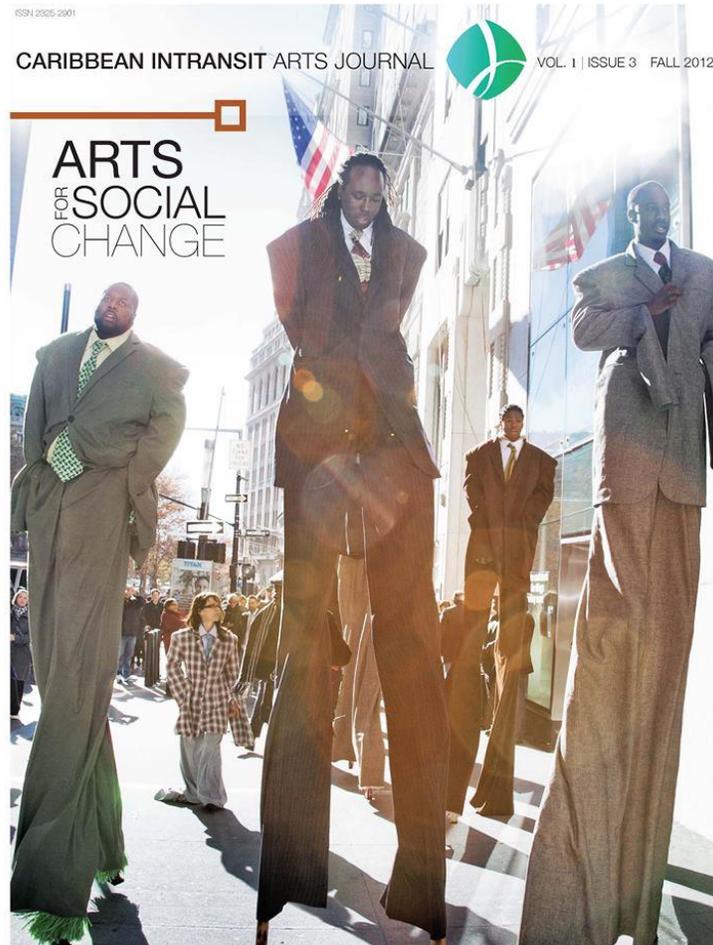
**AS:** *Is this a cautionary tale you are sharing to others who are interested in scholarly publishing online and open access in the Caribbean for Caribbean audiences?*

**MB:** I started the project while I was in university. I did not expect it to grow in the way it did. I did not have a business plan at first. I did it in the moment, with planning but not in terms of "what happens when I finish school". I tried to get someone to take over as a Managing Editor attached to an institution but the reality is that most scholars in the region are over burdened with work. They may see the value of the project but they have too much on their plates. This is understandable. If I can't offer them a salary, they say, "take on yet another thing?"

**AS:** *How have digital technologies transformed the Caribbean literary and creative landscape?*

**MB:** In terms of connectivity between artists and writers it allows for greater networking. You meet someone at one event in one year and you continue communication with him or her across social media. When you see them, you're able to converse on project that they are doing or congratulate them. We perform on a world stage and there is greater connectivity with artists. I think we still have a long way to go in terms of formalising that within institutions. We are still struggling with what the digital space means and accepting it. We are allowing it to shift how we practice. It is still being entertained within the institution but there is greater work to be done.

I think that in the Caribbean we could do more to invest in living archives. The Banyan and TTT archives can be used creatively in digital formats. I don't think we lack the vision; there is a lack of political will.



*Cover of Caribbean InTransit Journal, Issue 3 (2012)*

**AS:** *You are a young woman positioned outside of the academy yet engaged in knowledge production and academic writing. What are the implications of your current positioning on your productivity and relationship with the academy?*

**MB:** I think the academy continues to be male-dominated; however, it has not necessarily affected me negatively. There is openness to women in the arts and humanities. My gender was more of a contentious issue when I was doing my PhD. mixed with their lack of interest in Caribbean work and my blackness. They had to deal with a Caribbean, black, woman and artist. It appeared that few were prepared for that complexity in terms of research so I struggled to cobble together a committee, not unlike the only other Caribbean student in my programme.

I graduated a year and a half ago and being outside of the academy is challenging. Doing the work of the arts, training with at-risk youth and keeping up with academia is a life without sleep. Then I have to try to figure out how to fund it and that makes for some challenging life situations. It is not sustainable and I have to make a decision one way or the other.

## Content Production and the Digital Humanities

**AS:** *While digital media has brought new possibilities to the Caribbean literary and creative landscape, are there new players?*

**MB:** There will always be new players on the scene. Now there is great deal of self-publishing and they can make themselves visible on their own without making some authoritative figure having to do that on their behalf. When you publish something online as a blog, you can make a name before you get into a publication. The playing field has changed with digital media. You can operate outside of formal institutions and be very successful.

**AS:** *Why did you produce a journal that engages both the online and print formats?*

**MB:** At the end of the day, as an artist I am a tactile person. There is something about holding the book, touching the book, seeing the book. This cannot be replaced by the digital revolution. Looking at all the books on the shelf excites me. I don't want all my books online. I don't want that. The experience of turning the page, seeing it and feeling it is part of the experience of reading. I consume many things through my phone and iPad but there is a reduced experience of variation. There is an interaction that happens with the physical object that is different from technology. Books are important because they are stimuli. It's similar to the painting on a wall. Why not just have projected images up there? No.

**AS:** *What do you see as the future of digital technologies and media in relation to the Caribbean literary and creative landscape?*

**MB:** I am testing these boundaries even now. I want to see different kinds of publications online that create different experiences with knowledge. But we need to be much more serious and consistent about digital technology and media to achieve things. For example, the conference on digital humanities<sup>4</sup> – what happens in the gap until the next conference when we think about it again? The digital needs to be integrated into our teaching and learning process in order to progress as it is doing in other parts of the world. *ARC Magazine* is no longer being published. The challenge with these projects is sustaining them. We 'stop and start'. I call it staccato. But we are grateful that some of the work existed. We need more activists in the arts to challenge our leaders and institutions to take up the digital seriously. I don't see our formal institutions taking the lead.

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<sup>4</sup> THTCamp Caribe: WILC Pre-conference event was an unconference hosted by The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, October 3, 2017. The focus of the event was on digital humanities and Caribbean literary studies. (See: <https://sta.uwi.edu/conferences/17/literature/preconferenceworkshop.asp> )

## Conclusion

Barrow, in her interview, explains the struggles of Caribbean artists today – to build community, support themselves financially, achieve institutional and formal recognition and sustain their craft. Her passion has driven her to creating online and offline communities of practice and research in the Caribbean creative industry. Through the “serious” and committed application of the digital humanities, the potential for the Caribbean are endless. The potential is there, it is already happening but challenges persist for innovators like Barrow. Digital technologies and media are mainstream. However, the question is not – should we join? Instead, the questions are – What is the quality of our presence as Caribbean people in a digital future and how much are we willing to invest in that future?

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